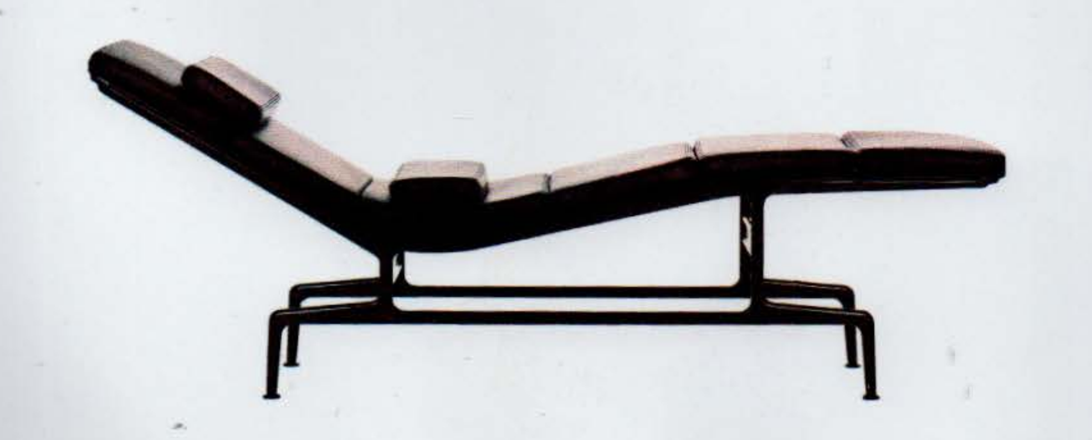
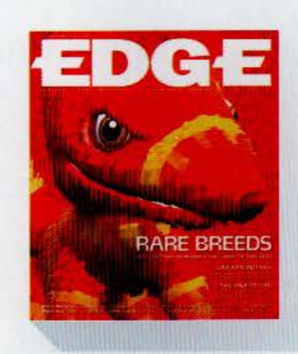


VIDEOGAME CULTURE
OCTOBER 2006
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RARE BREEDS
Will Viva Piñata break open a new market for Xbox 360?
LIFE BEYOND REZ
Tetsuya Mizuguchi on how music and 'mediabigaku' will shape the future
THE DNA OF GTA
Free-roaming gaming evolves as Dave Jones unveils Crackdown
PREVIEWED KANE & LYNCH JUST CAUSE SCARFACE GTA: VICE CITY STORIES COMPANY OF HEROES TIMESHIFT
REVIEWED DEAD RISING TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED YAKUZA SAINTS ROW LEGO STAR WARS II CONTACT GTR2



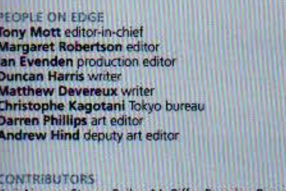


What are videogames? It looks like a simple question until you try to answer it. Don't think you can fudge it by getting bogged down in the niceties of distinguishing between a videogame and a computer game, or slogging through an academic debate on the nature of play. It's just a simple question looking for a simple answer, but the chances are that nothing's tripping off your tongue.

For Dave Jones, who's graduated from pioneering *Grand Theft Auto* to presiding over *Crackdown*, they're chemistry sets (p16) – volatile store-cupboards of cause and effect, waiting for someone to wander by and start the show. And as the free-roaming adventure comes of age – in this issue alone we get to grips with *Just Cause*, *Yakuza*, *Dead Rising*, *Scarface*, *Saints Row* and *Gangs Of London* – it's clear that his definition is shared by a large proportion of developers. For Ken Levine, the writer of *Thief* and now creative director of *Bioshock*, they're psychopathic holidays – or at least, all too often that's what how they end up. You can read on p44 about how he explains that definition, and how he intends to overturn it.

And what might Microsoft's answer be? Since its announcement of *Viva Piñata*, that's been a perplexing proposition. Does it show that Microsoft views videogames as a neat way of exploiting the pocket money of the one age-group the company's never been able to reach? Or that it sees them as a stepping stone towards being a multimedia mogul, raking in the cash from movies and musicals as well as plushes and lunchboxes. Or does it show that it's not sure what videogames are either, reduced to letting its $377 million investment waste its energy reinventing the Tamagotchi? But, as you'll see on p56, the answers to *Viva Piñata's* questions are refreshingly simple and hearteningly sincere. *Viva Piñata* is the world Rare sees when it closes its eyes, and it's built it out of pixels so it can invite you round to play. And that, perhaps, is the answer to the question we started with. Other media let you see inside other people's imaginations; games let you explore.





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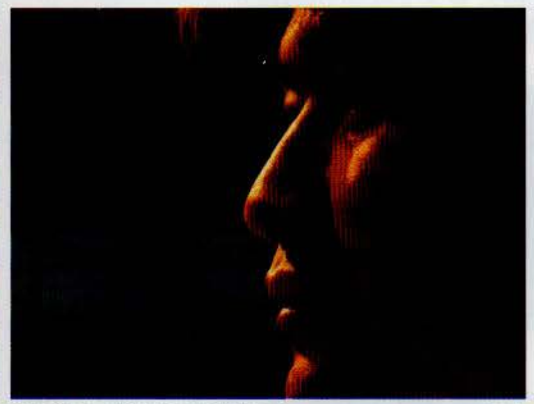
CONTENTS
OCTOBER

This month

THE LURKING DEEP 44
Life on the seabed has thrown up some new ideas for Ken Levine. He tells us about *Bioshock* and 'analogue puzzles'



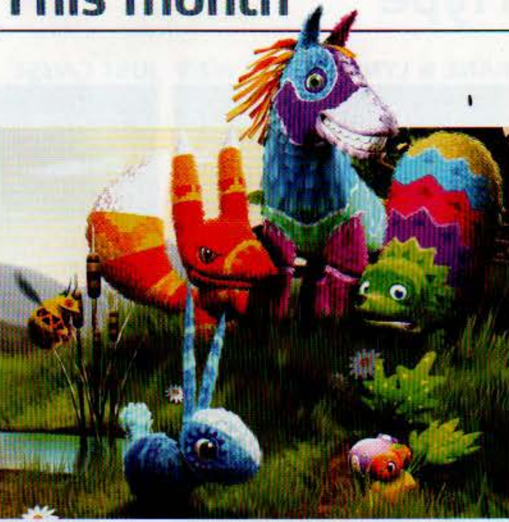
CITY HUNTER 50
Crackdown comes from the brains behind *GTA*, and brings a superhero twist to inner-city brawling and crimefighting



THE GRID RUNNER 64
We sit down with Tetsuya Mizuguchi to talk puzzles, music and what 15 years of game development have taught him



SONIC BOOM 70
It surrounds you as you play, but how has the art of noise evolved, and where is it going in a multichannel future?



HOW DOES THEIR GARDEN... 56
grow? We visit Rare to discover *Viva Piñata* – the irresistable face of Microsoft's plan for world domination

Every month

8 **Start**
News, interviews and more

24 **Something About Japan**
Shows across the globe

96 **Time Extend**
The golden powers of *Guardian Heroes*

102 **The Making Of...**
Impossible Mission

106 **Edge Moves**
Your chance to work in the videogame industry

118 **Codeshop**
New releases in 3D modelling

120 **Yak's Progress**
Jeff Minter eats brains

122 **The Guest Column**
Tim Guest explores online advertising

124 **Biffovision**
The joys of RSI, with Mr Biffo

126 **Inbox**
Your letters, plus Crashlander



CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN
360, PC 28

JUST CAUSE
360, PC, PS2, Xbox 30

SCARFACE
PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox 31

GTA: VICE CITY STORIES
PSP 32

WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS
PC 33

BROKEN SWORD: TAOD
PC 34

BIT GENERATIONS
GBA 36

COMPANY OF HEROES
PC 38

TIMESHIFT
360, PC 40

COLIN MCRAE: DIRT
360, PS3 40

KILLZONE: LIBERATION
PSP 41

GUNDAM: TARGET IN SIGHT
360, PS3 41

Review

DEAD RISING



360 80

EVERY EXTEND EXTRA



PSP 86

SAINTS ROW
360 88



GANGS OF LONDON



PSP 94





TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED
360, PC, PS2, PSP 82

STAR FOX COMMAND
DS 87

YAKUZA
PS2 84

GTR2
PC 89

LEGO STAR WARS II
Multi 90

BULLET WITCH
360 92

CONTACT
DS 93

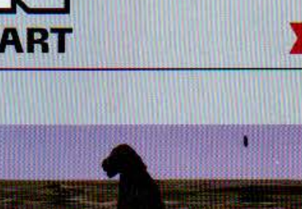
B-BOY
PS2, PSP 94

RHYTHM TENGOKU
GBA 95

MARIO HOOPS 3-ON-3
DS 95



START



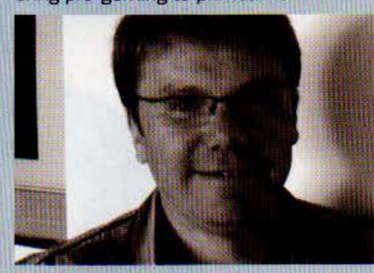
8 **Google knocks**
How the search giant is taking its first steps into the world of games



12 **Goodbye, old friend**
We guage reaction to the news that the E3 of old is to be downsized

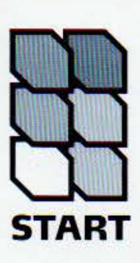


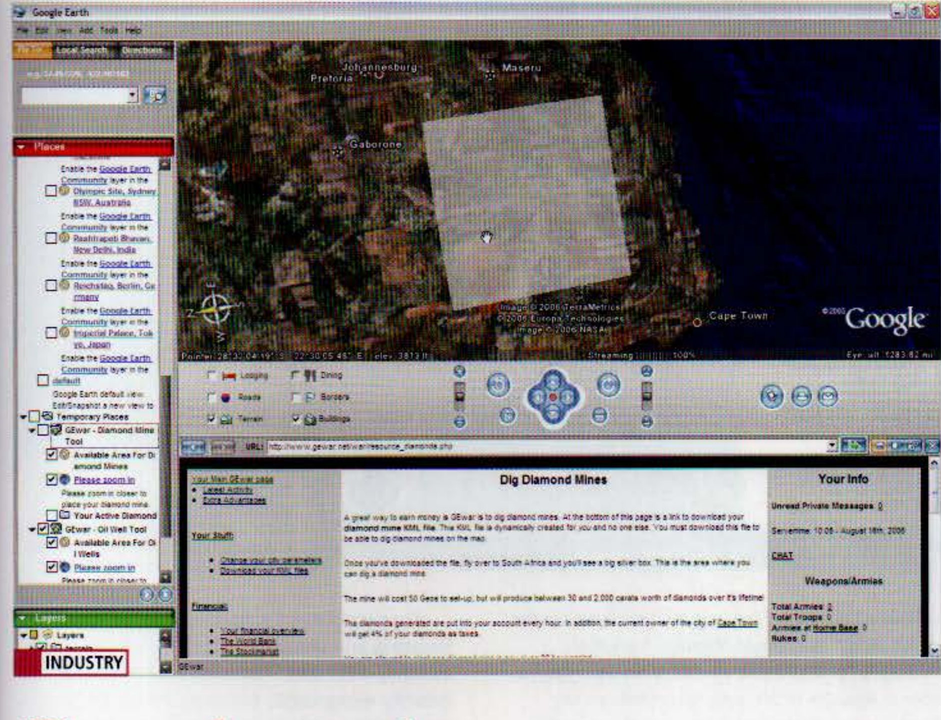
14 **The game always shines on TV**
London-based Prize Fight wants to bring pro-gaming to primetime



16 **Total respray**
From car thieves to superheroes, we talk to Dave Jones about evolution

18 **Build your own games**
...at a price, as Microsoft makes life a little better for homebrewers


START





Google gets games

Is the increasinly omnivorous search engine empire developing an appetite for videogames?

Say 'Google' and 'games' and you'll most likely think back to that first happy afternoon you spent googlewhacking. It's a good few years since the simple pleasures of typing two words into its search box in the hope of finding a combination which produced just one solitary result seemed like worthwhile entertainment, and in those years a lot has changed – not least Google. A service which won the hearts of the world for its no-frills presentation of raw information, now has ambitions as a TV station (Google Video) and an office software maker (Google Calendar, Google Spreadsheets and through the recent acquisition of web-based word processor Writely). It powers millions of blogs through its ownership of Blogger, offers website traffic tracking services through Google Analytics, and makes millions each day from its Google Adsense advertising system. It wants to organise your photos (Picasa), manage your communications (Google Mail and Google Talk) and take up residence on your PC (Google Desktop). Combined, these efforts brought the company nearly $6 billion (£3.2 billion) in revenue in the first half of this year. And now, it also make games.

That's not, of course, to suggest that EA or Capcom should be looking over their shoulders, but as Google's reach extends into more and more unexpected industries, its clear there's a role it's already playing within gaming. It starts with *The Da Vinci Code Quest* – a virtual paper-chase game produced to publicise the movie, created by Google in collaboration with Columbia Tristar. And these promotional Easter egg hunts are growing in popularity: you may not have followed up on the recent adverts exhorting you to find a buried Mazda CX-7, but if you had, it would have taken you on a search round Google Earth's virtual globe. Adidas Australia has also signed up, running a football trivia-related quiz across Google's vision of the world, and you can set sail for Captain Jack Sparrow's Caribbean pirate island with a zoom of your mouse-wheel. Game developers have long seen the potential of Google's treasury of interconnected information – it's difficult to imagine playing *In Memoriam* without its help – but now Google itself is taking advantage of its playful potential.

As Google's reach extends into more and more unexpected industries, its clear there's a role it's already playing within gaming

And it turns out that the more you look for Google games, the more you find. Take the time to personalise your Google homepage, and you will find versions of *Pac-Man* and *Bejewelled*, as well as less familiar titles like *Flood It* and *ColorJunction*. Since Google's philosophy makes nearly all of its software freely available, independent game creators have been quick to join the fray. *Play Google Earth* (www.playgoogleearth.com) offers cash prizes for those quick enough to follow the clues, although like many amateur Google Earth-based games it's only sporadically updated. A smart Risk clone, soon served with a cease and desist order from copyright holders Hasbro, led the way for elaborate strategy games like *GEwar* (www.gewar.net). Another board game classic blossomed into a prototype version of Battleships, played out on the real oceans (http://research.techkwondo.com/blog/julian/240).

Goggles (above) has quickly become the best known Google-based game, but pioneers like *GEwar* (top left) paved the way for the playful exploitation of Google's services

Most popular however, has been *Goggles* (http://www.isoma.net/games/goggles.html), **Mark Caswell-Daniels**' flight sim, which uses the data from Google Maps to provide a backdrop for a dinky biplane. However, Google can't claim to be the inspiration for this one: "I thought of the idea quite a while ago, when I saw Streetmap," recalls Caswell-Daniels, currently a designer and Flash game maker. "I thought it would be great to be able to fly over it – but I had other things to do, so I left it and came back to it." Then, someone pointed out MSN Maps, but when he looked into it, "I couldn't load those images into Flash, so I used Google's." The game leaked out, courtesy of





The treasure that you find may not be quite worth the effort, but visiting Captain Jack Sparrow's island via the Google Earth promotion shows how the service can adapt to fantasy settings.

an over-excited friend, and Caswell-Daniels soon found himself swamped. "He sent it to everyone he knew – Digg got hold of it and a few sites went mad. I was getting calls from my hosting company saying: 'We're going to have to move you to another server.' Google called and asked for a CV – Yahoo! got in touch to ask why I hadn't done it with Yahoo! Maps. It's been phenomenal."

But that enquiry from Yahoo! touches on a key point: the data contained in Google Maps and Google Earth isn't Google's, but licensed from a number of different providers, and that makes co-opting it for your own project a slightly sticky issue, as Google's legal team is keen to make clear: "We're delighted that Google Maps and Google Earth are inspiring users to create games. However, any developers working on games in this area should make sure that they carefully check the terms of service for the product or service concerned to make sure that their intended use is allowed. If there's any doubt, it's a good idea to contact Google in advance and discuss your plans."

The response from the gaming community has been equally predictable. Although Caswell-Daniels has plans to expand the game – to put in "key buildings and create a sequential set of levels", that's not enough to sate the inevitable bloodlust. "I'm getting emails saying 'we need nuclear weapons and rocket launchers!'" he reveals, wryly, "but I just wanted to make a toy plane." It's a laudable intention, but there's no getting away from the fact that the games currently growing out of Google's search and mapping services are far too rudimentary to compete with more accomplished game projects. Can they ever be more than a tinkerer's hobby?

The answer comes in the form of SketchUp (www.sketchup.com), another of Google's free software products. "The way I'd describe it for the uninitiated," says **Engin Yilmaz**, marketing manager, "is that it's for anyone who wants to be able to visualise in 3D, with the minimum of learning and ability, and share that visualisation quickly and easily with colleagues and clients." In practice, SketchUp takes the process of creating 3D models and turns it into something about as daunting and technical as doodling on the back of an envelope. Your early results may well be wonky, but it's unlikely to take you more than ten minutes to produce something that looks like every eight-year-old's dream house. And, if you're not sure where to start, then SketchUp users provide a large repository of the models they've created at Google's 3D Warehouse (http://sketchup.google.com/3dwarehouse), freely shared with other SketchUppers. This being Google, SketchUp is thoroughly integrated with Google Earth, meaning models can be uploaded and placed into the real world, letting you see how your dream house would look in situ, or create a parade of giant scissor people marching down Oxford Street.

The possibilities for 'mash-up' games drawn in SketchUp and situated within Google Earth is self-evidently enormous. Automatically networked, instantly recognisable, full of resonance and quickly customisable, Google Earth forms an amazingly adaptive canvas. And it plays well with another growing branch of gaming – the kind of mixed-reality game made famous by the *Halo 2* promo I Love Bees. Easily able to process GPS co-ordinates, there are substantial possibilities for games where the movements of real-world people are represented by the progress of SketchUp-created avatars across Google Earth's surface.

And the potential of these tools which are so simple to grasp (as well as free or extremely cheap to access) but far-reaching in their implications has been noted by the professional game design community. Staff at Real Time Worlds are happy to endorse it as the 'ultimate level design tool', Sai Ton Man, a designer at Ninja Theory, includes it on his list of software it's worth budding game designers familiarising themselves with and



Google's personalised home-page may be exactly at odds with the purity of presentation which attracted many of its users in the first place, but for those who like the clutter there already worthwhile gaming diversions. It's unlikely that the inevitable spread of *Pac-Man* or *Bejeweled* will excite you, but Flood It (top left) and *Colorjunction* (bottom left) both sooth away a spare minute if you're stuck on hold

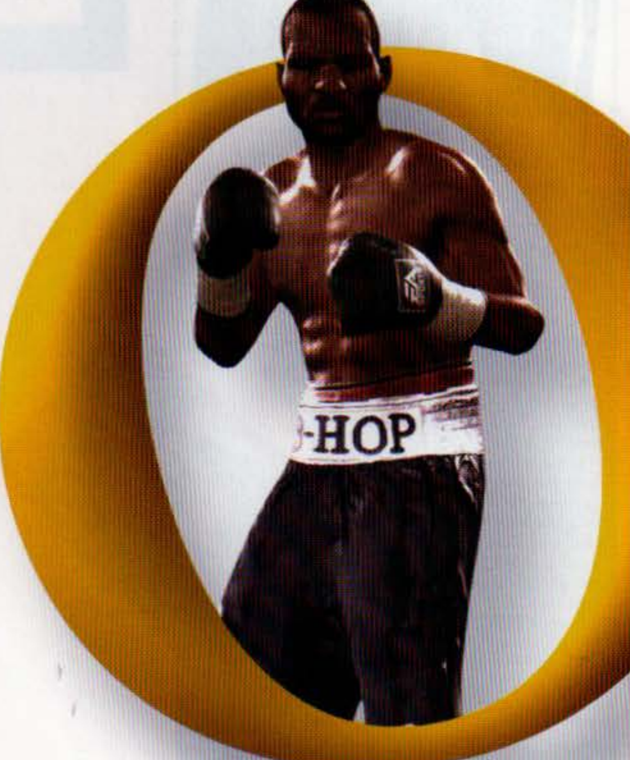
Page through the 3D Warehouse and the first thing you'll find that isn't a car, tree, building or person is Godzilla, created by a user called 'cube3'. Download the model into Google Earth, and you can see him in place as he terrorizes Tokyo. But download it, and the work of another anonymous SketchUpper, and he becomes a very unexpected Easter egg on the top of Princess Peach's castle

Lionhead's official blog reports how integral SketchUp is proving in mapping out *Fable 2*'s elaborate worlds. At a time when the importance of thorough pre-production is being more and more heavily emphasised as the costs, and risks, of game projects rise, its usefulness as a quick-fire prototyping tool is quickly becoming recognised. And, as teams become bigger, specialisations more precise and publishers more hands-on, its value as a communication tool is clear. From level design to producing a story-board for a cutscene, the SketchUp dream of '3D for everyone' is just as relevant within a game studio as in the architect's offices the software was originally designed for.

Visiting Google is a little like visiting a future utopia. Everyone you meet at their London HQ has grown up with the idea of technology as a plaything

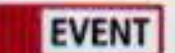
Nonetheless, Yilmaz recognises that it's not a tool to compete with established 3D software, like Maya or 3DS Max, although the Pro version of SketchUp (which costs £315) can import and export files compatible with those programmes. "It's not looking to displace either of those packages," he affirms, "but to complement them. If you take 3D Studio Max, as a package, that's very very strong , but SketchUp will allow a designer to visualise much, much quicker, and the flexibility of it means there's a significant benefit in terms of costings and amount of time expended. SketchUp is rarely the beginning or the end – designers may start a model in SketchUp, then it may spend some time in Photoshop, then in 3ds Max, then back to SketchUp. So SketchUp, through the files that it supports, has become a thread that links the main visualisation programmes together."

For many years, the games industry has talked with wide-eyed anticipation about a time when everyone has grown up with games, and everyone accepts and understands them. Visiting Google is a little like visiting that future utopia. Everyone you meet at their London HQ is a gamer of some sort or other, someone who has grown up with the idea of technology as a plaything as well as a tool. Just how far Google's integration with games will go is still hard to predict – will 3D Warehouse become monetised, so modellers can make a living selling their creations? Will it evolve into the dream of a common pool of objects so each game doesn't have to draw everything from scratch every time? Will Google's expanding AdSense empire be drawn to the potentially rich pickings of in-game advertising? Will Google Video's library of speed-runs and game trailers mange to outgrow its rivals and undermine the video vaults of IGN and GameSpot? It may be too early to say, but what's already clear is that Google is here to play. And if you doubt that, then you didn't have your eyes peeled when you downloaded the first release of Google Talk. Hidden in the credits was the following Easter egg: 'play 23 21 13 16 21 19 . 7 1 13 5'. Break the code, 'add wumpus.game' to your friends list, and you accessed an online version of 1972's seminal *Hunt The Wumpus*. Could there be a neater way for a company to establish its gamer credentials?





One of the more baffling aspects of the E3 announcement, or more specifically its timing, was the comparative calm of this year's event next to the bedlam of its predecessors



E3: after the fall

Why did it collapse? What will it become? Who will take its place?

Developers needed it, publishers fought for it, consumers craved it and the ladies of the booths were told to stop it; simply put, the E3 we knew died of exposure. Prior to this month's announcement of significant cutbacks, officially a collaborative ESA response to longstanding problems, the event was demonstrably unsustainable. Sony broke the bank but managed only to dent its reputation, and even its grinning competitors would have frowned when tallying the costs. Smaller studios desperate to catch a financier's eye were being lost amid the clamour, and press attendees sent the same footage echoing across the net in different formats, at different resolutions, with the same exhausted opinions attached. At a trade show devised to connect publishers and retailers, something was bound to give.

"Even when a show is designed to be trade/media only, it's still incredibly crowded, with limited opportunities to really get to grips with product"

While the ESA formulates its plans for the newly titled E3 Media Festival, expected to comprise a series of more modest hotel presentations, industry people of all sectors are conducting their post-mortems.

"I had a kind of schizophrenic reaction," says **Björn Sunesson**, game designer at *Metronome* developer Tarsier. "The gamer in me came out first with a knee jerk 'what in the hell?' Moments later the developer part caught up with an 'about time!'" And that reaction's widely shared. "Astonishment," recalls **Angela Schierholz**, project director of the Leipzig GC, "although the rumours about ongoing discussions had prepared us for it somewhat." Rebellion communications head **Kristien Wendt** admits: "Obviously, the event has grown significantly over the past few years, but I expected it to plateau for the foreseeable future."

So why didn't it? Is there truth to the suggestion that US and UK retail has become so consolidated, and major publishers so enamoured with the prospect of more intimate PR events, that so-called 'trade shows' such as E3, and to a lesser extent Leipzig, are redundant? "The GC has been working closely with the industry since the concept phase," explains Schierholz. "It has a highly active advisory board and we conduct extensive exhibitor and customer surveys for each event. The media coverage isn't only analysed from a quantitative angle, but also a qualitative one. Only by doing so is it possible to ensure that an event such as the GC addresses the needs and requirements of its customers – the exhibitors, trade, public and media."

Though cost/reward concerns were initially rumoured to be behind the E3 announcement, the ESA's more ambiguous explanation suggested a wide-ranging dissatisfaction. Taking the rumours at face value for a moment, we ask Wendt if an E3 consumer show might have been a more productive, more profitable change of tack. "Probably not, the main reason being that even when it's designed to be trade/media only, it's still incredibly crowded, with limited opportunities to really get to grips with product. If it was open to the public, bearing in mind the popularity of gaming, it could become counter-productive to what publishers need."

OUT THERE



THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

For the western *Silent Hill* fanatic that doesn't quite have everything – that is, if your shelf doesn't already proudly display the Lost Memories DVD as well as the Silent Hill Experience – the work being done at Translated Memories just might be up your particular dark and rusted chain-link alley. Fans there have worked through the material that's never made it outside Japan, the Lost Memories booklet included with the *Silent Hill 3* strategy guide in particular (referred to by the site as the "Holy Grail of *Silent Hill* lore") as well as *The Room*'s victim files, and translated all their various trivia into English. The story recaps might be little more than easy refresher for some, but the glimpses into character naming conventions – which reveal staff inspiration beyond Dario Argento and Troma to Vincent Gallo and Lolita – are far more revealing.

• http://www.translatedmemories.com



The booth babes, the props, the backdrops and the sound systems all played their roles in sending attendees' budgets through the roof of the Los Angeles Convention Center. The bigger, more overarching CES still has its glitz, but keeps it comparatively reserved and sustainable





That pivotal concern of what's actually necessary is stirring some debate, not least among the natural competitors being sucked towards the vacuum left by old E3. Predicting which event will become the next 'megashow' isn't just a question of timing, but of focus and understanding. Though claims have been staked both overtly (Korea's Asia-oriented GSTAR event, to be held from November 9-12) or as subtext (this month's Penny Arcade Expo, said by business director **Robert Khoo** to be uninterested in E3's crown, yet "clearly growing in leaps and bounds"). Further candidates include Ziff Davis Media's Digital Life event in New York, and of course Leipzig. But having dwarfed E3 with the overarching CES, it's the Consumer Electronics Association that's making the loudest noise, the most decisive moves and the most auspicious proposal.

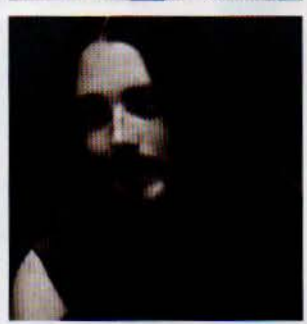
"The bottom line is that there may still be a void here in the United States," explains **Karen Chupka**, senior vice president of conferences and events at the CEA. "People participate in shows around the world and do that for global exposure, but there's such a huge gaming market in the US alone that it'd be somewhat remiss not to have some opportunity. The thing that you feel most working in trade shows is that there's always the momentum of people having that on their calendars, and when you skip a year then that's where you can miss out.

"We first came out with just a general statement saying that we were looking at forming this advisory committee, and that interested parties should be contacting us. It looks all in all like there are about 40-or-so people now, and we'll probably hear from a few more over the next 48 hours, because what we also did this week was start



The recently signed *Project Offset*, together with CD Projekt's *The Witcher*, represents the kind of ambitious project that the new E3 might overlook. That said, plenty such titles found themselves lost behind the stands of their potential publishers anyway



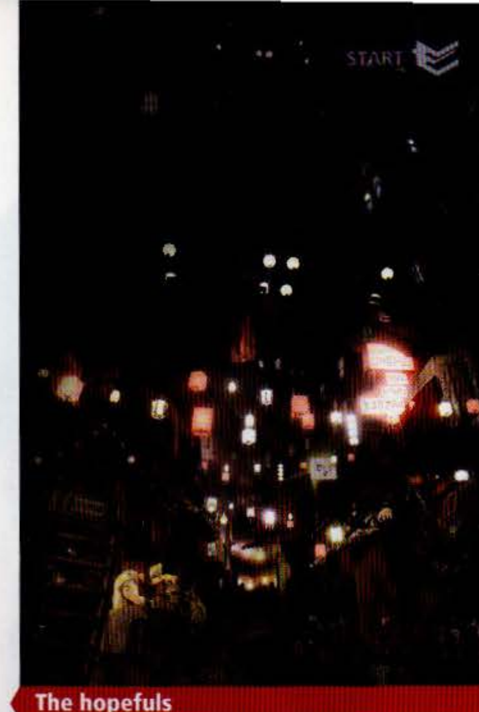
Clockwise from top left: CEA conference vice president Karen Chupka, Rebellion head of communications Kristien Wendt, communication specialist Lukasz Mach of CD Projekt, and Tarsier designer Björn Sunesson, whose prototype for *Metronome* was a fine complement to this from-the-floor, off-the-wall photo. Not pictured: Leipzig director Angela Schierholz

more of an outreach programme to some of our customers who participate in the international CES. If everything indicated a positive move towards going forward, we could look at doing something as early as next year.

"Our intention isn't necessarily to squash whatever E3 feels it needs to do, but to try and figure out something that complements it and addresses those who perhaps don't feel that the new plan is meeting their requirements."

Said to include potentially alienated, medium-sized companies such as Majesco and NCSoft, that may or may not include the public. "We see it as being a wider scope above gaming, of entertainment. Gaming isn't just what's happening on a PC or platform system: there are mobile technologies and other systems that bring the experience home. Part of our role is to help [industry communities] define what they want gaming to be, and what all the ancillary categories around gaming are that might sensibly be brought together. Then you try to figure out if that becomes a trade show environment or one with a consumer component," says Chupka.

"The reasoning behind this [proposal] is that it's important for small businesses to be able to come to market, and if you take that away, it takes away the spirit of entrepreneurialism and everything else, and that's why our board edged us to take this step forward. We believe in its value, and we believe in the role it can play."



The hopefuls

Even at critical mass, E3 could be a land of opportunity

"To tell the truth it was one of the most important moments for *The Witcher* every year," says Lukasz Mach, communication specialist for Polish studio CD Projekt. "At every E3 we gained huge interest among fans, and press from around the whole world. But it's true that making demos and presentations is a problem for companies and takes precious time that could be spent making the game itself. Before every E3 we had problems asking guys from development to leave the game to make a great presentation or demo." Yet for *Metronome* (pictured above) studio Tarsier, the downscaling isn't expected to have a great impact on working practice. "I guess less panic before the actual show," admits Sunesson, "and less people constantly refreshing browsers. I suppose it might also lead to stressed and tired acquisitions people, which is bad since you can no longer cover up your crazy ideas by bribing them with food."

Newswire



Ghostbusters

Without so much as an official announcement from parent company Phantom Entertainment (once Infinium Labs), it seems the Phantom Game Receiver has been entirely scrapped – although how you can scrap something that never seemed to exist in the first place we're not quite sure. All traces of the machine have been removed from the company's website, and in its place comes news of a simple download service for Windows. Whether or not that market – for which there are already several competitors – will prove viable remains to be seen, suggesting that Phantom Entertainment's best hope remains its swish, ergonomic lap-board.



Newswire



Victory for 'violent' games

US legislation meant to curb the sale of Mature-rated games is starting to significantly backfire. On August 9 an Illinois district judge repealed an 'unconstitutional law' preventing the sale of 'violent' videogames in the state. Adding injury to insult, Illinois tax-payers are now faced with a bill of $500,000 in compensation to various games industry and retail bodies for loss of business. This follows a similar ruling at the end of July in which the state of Minnesota overturned a law designed to fine children for buying games with adults-only ratings. Implications are that other anti-game suits may have to be reconsidered nationwide.

Correction

In E166's interview with ISM's Stewart Kosoy, a transcription error led to us wrongly crediting Digital Illusions with work on the *Unreal* series. Apologies for the mistake, and for introducing an innacuracy into his answer.

MEDIA



Rankings and ratings

A new online/TV hybrid intends to take pro-gaming to the masses

Imagine a time when the world's highest paid sports star is not a footballer, golfer or racing driver but a professional gamer. Moreover, what if all you needed to get cracking in your gaming career were a broadband connection and a copy of your favourite FPS? Envisaging an age in which Football Focus is replaced by Quake 4 Focus may seem far fetched, but it's the aim of Prize Fight managing director **Paul Sulyok** to make it a reality.

Here's how it works: Prize Fight is an online service that, for a fee, allows gamers to pit their skills against each other in matches averaging ten to 20 minutes (longer in bigger tournaments) for a place in a gaming league. The very best participants are then televised going head-to-head on Prize Fight TV, a primetime satellite show airing on Friday nights. There's also a cash incentive, as online match winners win a percentage of entry fees for each particular match.

The level of IP secured for the service would suggest that Prize Fight is serious about breaking pro-gaming into the mainstream. With the likes of *Call Of Duty 2*, *Quake 4* and *Half-Life 2* deathmatch running off the company's servers it's clear it has thought hard about laying authentic gaming foundations. "When we first started speaking to publishers they looked at us in a strange way," says Sulyok. "But from the outset we've gone to some of the biggest publishers that are out there. It works to our benefit and their

"We're itching to put some driving, RTS and sports games on there. We are looking for more games that are multiplayer-led"



Although perennial online favourite *Counter-Strike* is included in the service, newer products such as *Quake 4* and *Call Of Duty 2* can provide a more contemporary competitive environment



Sulyok (above) says that London-based Prize Fight is attracting an international membership. "In fact," he recounts, "we're getting more people coming on from Europe than we are from the UK"

benefit. It also allows them to extend the longevity of their sales profile as people remain interested in the games, rather than just play it, put it down and buy another one."

Many pro-gaming sceptics cite the lack of accessible games in tournaments as a problem, pointing out that the public generally doesn't understand the format of complex firstperson shooters like those on Prize Fight. How soon can we expect driving or sports sims on the service? "Not soon enough!" laughs Sulyok. "We're itching to put some driving, RTS and sports games on there." Why haven't they? "Most of these games are peer to peer. There aren't many driving games that work off a centralised server. But we are looking for more games that are multiplayer-led."

Perhaps one of the biggest issues with taking pro-gaming forward is a dearth of media interest. How does Prize Fight TV intend to hold its own when so many gaming shows have been exercises in marketing cynicism? The key, according to Sulyok, is "to treat games in a slightly more mature manner as opposed to trivialising them." But how can he reassure viewers that Prize Fight isn't more interested in hawking games than running a professional competition? "We're not strictly saying: 'Go out there and buy X, Y or Z game.' We're saying: 'Look at the skills this particular individual or clan are showing when playing the game.' No one has come to us yet and said: 'Hey, all you're trying to do is product place the latest EA or Ubisoft titles.'" Sulyok says that it's this ethos that has allowed the show to get around the UK's



The prospect of gaming talking heads may seem too boring for words but Prize Fight TV's game analysts are both knowledgeable and lively. Their views on the realtime footage will strike a chord with gamers watching at home, but it's not all po-faced about pro-gaming: the 'Unnamed Soldier' (above right) humorously takes viewers through what would happen if in-game situations were real

notorious advertising restrictions for showing in-game footage.

A major objective of Prize Fight TV is to make gaming more palatable to mass media tastes. Sulyok is direct about why the show exists: "The television aspect is just purely for people to generate a level of celebrity for their skills. People are genuinely interested in it. When we launched in January we were inundated with applications from clans."

But Prize Fight isn't alone in wanting to take pro-gaming to new heights. Microsoft looms on the horizon, promising to use Xbox Live as a vehicle for both the playing and transmission of tournaments in the near future. Does this level of competition worry Prize Fight? "Not really. I think it's great Microsoft are doing what they're doing. We would at some stage like to move into the console arena." But it's difficult to see how this might happen considering the monopoly console makers have in captive online audiences. "At the moment we're PC-based," Sulyok acknowledges. "There won't just be one medium for people to work on."

The big question: will gaming ever be considered a sport? Sulyok believes that it will: "Singapore has just signed electronic gaming off as a sport. Participants can apply to the Singaporean lottery for funds to support them. If you look at skill levels involved you're looking at levels comparable to sports like snooker, darts and curling. There's absolutely no reason why certain aspects of electronic games should not be considered a sport." Prize Fight is fighting hard for pro-gaming to be taken seriously. Only public interest, or lack of it, can decide its fate.

Breaking down gameplay elements play-for-play style is a key part of the show. Aspiring pro-gamers will be grateful for advice, while more casual players can pick up hints and tips

WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Purely academic yet somehow strangely compulsive, obscure gaming site ASSEMbler revels not so much in nostalgia, but in the nearly nostalgic. Its list of consoles that either never made it into full scale production or escaped mainstream public attention is by turns fascinating and amusing.

What's interesting about looking back at these dinosaurs and dodos is how much perceptions have changed. Sega's prototype AI8300, for example, now looks uncannily like a giant DS, and whilst the prospect of Daewoo taking console gaming by storm may seem laughable now, the company's MSX-based Zemmix shows that this was a very real intention in the late '80s and early '90s.

Grainy, low-res images complete an underground aesthetic and the odd typo is totally forgivable. There's also a forum for the few lucky visitors who may recognise their own outcast machines.

Site:
ASSEMbler
URL:
http://assembler.roarvgm.com/



SOUND BYTES

"The police are really good at understanding 'someone stole my credit card and ran up a lot of money.' It's a lot harder to get them to buy into 'someone stole my magic sword.'"
Microsoft security development engineer David Weinstein acknowledges the dangers of MMO identity theft.

"In 2011, Sony will once again be the market-share leader."
Report by analysts The Yankee Group bravely sticks its neck out and predicts the future

"Ultimately, I can't justify it. $600 is a lot of money, especially when I can get what – for me at least – will be a very similar experience for $400"
US Official PlayStation Magazine editor Dana Jongewaard undoes Sony's best efforts to stress the clear blue water between PS3 and 360 as she publicises her decision to buy the latter

"Shower before leaving and after arriving. Clean your body on a daily basis. This isn't just for you, but for anybody that happens to come within 50 feet of you on Friday night."
The official, all-too-necessary Quakecon 2006 "things to remember" list.



Real time words

The former founder of DMA Design and now head of Real Time Worlds talks about the power of Live, streaming and sharing

Dave Jones' softography is a well-known wealth – including *Lemmings*, *Body Harvest*, *Hired Guns*, and the first two *GTA*s But ask him why he's not more famous or, rather, why he doesn't ride the renown of such games for the sake of promotion, and the answer's straightforwardly modest: it's just not the way he wants to do things. It means that when a game like *Crackdown* (see page 50) does step into the limelight proper, it can do so with eye-opening energy and not the painstaking, piece-by-piece striptease of bullet points that most games eke out over the space of a year. And, of course, it doesn't mean that he has nothing to say for himself…

"I'd like to see a co-op mode in every game. It'll become the norm and people are going to start questioning a game that doesn't have it"

***GTAs III, Vice City* and *San Andreas* – are they how you saw the series evolving in 3D?**
I'd say that, for me, the pinnacle was *Vice City*, I though that was absolutely brilliant. It had perfect timing, perfect music and a perfect level of humour. Then it lost the plot with *San Andreas*, where it went a bit too dark and story-driven.

What do you see next-gen technology being used for in the coming years? Remarkable visuals are already being explored, so where do you see that power going next?
Well, visuals will always be a concern – you've got some companies that will just keep pushing that envelope. Me, I'd like to see a co-op mode in every game. You've got to start breaking down those barriers. It'll become the norm and people are going to start questioning a game that doesn't have it. Loading times, too – I think people will have to think a lot more about streaming and not interrupting user experience. Too few games think it's unacceptable to jar the player that way. I'd like to see a lot more dynamic things done in some unrealistic worlds, but it's kinda hard – especially in print, if you're focusing on dynamics and movement – to make something look good in a screenshot, meaning it's also hard from the marketing perspective. So I hope it's not going to hurt too much when people start to experiment.

A number of deliberately controversial marketing stunts were used to promote the original *GTA*. Do you think it'll ever be possible to exploit the media in such a way again?
Online, maybe. But what I'm really interested in right now is something like YouTube – I'd love to get some kind of video mode into *Crackdown*, it's a game that screams out for it. That's how a game like this can really get put about, especially since it's such a visual game.

Are there any problems in current-day game development that, ten years ago, you'd never have expected to still be wrestling with today?
Latency's still a big issue. We've only got two players in co-op, and we're pretty much bound by latency. I'd like to see that being negated a bit more. In terms of other game design features… I suppose the amount of sheer manpower. You'd think we'd have better tools by now, for building cities like we're building, but it still takes a huge team of environment artists.


Real Time World's other project, MMO *APB*, is yet to debut, but Crackdown (above) reveals itself on page 50







GTA was as much an adventure in marketing as it was through the possibilities of free-roaming design. Nine years later, Jones wants to reinvent its wheels

Some months back, Epic's Mark Rein revealed that the development team on *Gears Of War* averaged about 25 people. Do you think we're heading towards a culture of smaller teams working around a core technology group?
Nah, I disagree with that fact anyway [laughs]. I'm sure there's some engine advertising going on there… first of all they've been developing their engine over 15 years or so, which is quite a lot, and Epic specialises in the shooter genre. If they wanted to start building worlds like ours, which are the 'do anything, go anywhere, steal any vehicle, I want hundreds of people on the screen' worlds, there's a lot of work to do to build that. So potentially, yeah, if you're sticking to a single genre and that only, but there will be plenty of games that require many, many more people.

With very few weeks left until PS3 hype begins to truly kick off, do you think Microsoft has done enough with 360 to capture the next-gen market?
In the online space, yes, since Live is a very, very good system. I seriously question Sony's policy of leaving it down to publishers to come up with their own standards for each game. I completely disagree with it. I'm not going to put my credit card details with five different companies for some bits of DLC. Sony is a huge force, and definitely has been with PS2 – but now I see it being, at worst, a 50/50 race, but as time goes on I lean more and more towards Microsoft. Wii looks like it's going to have its own space, of course, and everyone loves it.

Any plans for Wii or Xbox Live Arcade titles?
No, not at the moment. We're too busy with *Crackdown* and *APB*, which are our main concerns. Wii you'd have to look very, very carefully at with regards to the kind of games you'll do. Live Arcade is absolutely great and has tremendous potential; I'm involved with a company called Denki, which is where Gary Penn works, and they do a lot of casual, fun games, and through that we're going to look at Live Arcade.

Was the decision to punish the player in *Crackdown* for bad behaviour your choice, or a reaction to the current feelings about violent games?
It was our own choice. You are playing the good guy, and I don't want to break the fiction of the game by allowing you to drive down the pavement and mow down 100 pedestrians without any consequence, but at the same time you don't want to jam stuff down peoples' throats. The idea of holding back your progression is a good compromise, and you'll get a lot more from the game if you play smarter.

Has it been difficult to develop *Crackdown* without being able to rely on the presence of the 360's HDD as standard?
No, not at all. But you will need the hard drive if you want to do co-op. Otherwise, for the main game, it's not been an issue, since we've got such fast streaming times off the DVD. We're probably one of the most advanced streaming games out there, I believe – absolutely everything, the AI, music and geometry is streamed. We're really pushing it hard, and so far it has held together.

You've had to pull back the number of pedestrians that walk *Crackdown*'s streets, to give the player a bit more freedom for law enforcement – did you expect that to happen, to effectively have too much technology on your hands?
Not really, no. Then again, even though we've pulled them back, no doubt we've spent the power elsewhere. One of the interesting things about these dynamic worlds is that no matter how much power you give us, we can still find ways to use it, and it actually benefits the game exponentially. It's just an amazing environment to play with. The great thing about these urban games is the number of compound effects that are possible, and the chemistry set you can create is really interesting.

It would be good to have some new words with which to talk about free-roaming gaming, since so many such titles have followed in *GTA*'s wake. Is 'chemistry set' a suitable description we can start using?
There you go, then. Chemistry set games [laughs]. Almost works!

OUT THERE



INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY WARS

Anyone off looking for some *Geometry Wars*-inspired fun on the cheap recently may have come up empty-handed. Specifically, Marco Incitti's freeware PC clone *Grid Wars* has been pulled from the site and replaced with a message from Bizarre Creations citing flagging sales of the Live Arcade hit as cause to step up IP protection and take "amicable" action against such clones.

While it's hard to say whether a true case of customer siphoning through fan-works or simply saturation point for one of Live Arcade's most downloaded games, *Grid Wars* was the most popular but not the only remake on the market, with a homebrew PSP version just recently hitting the grey market. If you don't have the money or the means for Bizarre's official vector-wonder, though, we recommend in its stead any number of latter-day works by Kenta Cho: his most recent *Gunroar* and *Mu-cade* should sate that dual-stick hunger perfectly.

● http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/index_e.html

SOFTWARE

XNA hits home

Microsoft's newly announced Game Studio suite brings development to the masses





There's every chance that the majority of Game Studio products will fall short of the standards set by *Bejeweled 2* (top) and *Hoop World* (above), but there'll inevitably successes as well

When Sony unveiled Net Yaroze in 1997, "Let's work together" was a powerful message with a caveat to match – the privilege would cost you $750. Though it yielded a steady stream of freebies for the Official Playstation Magazine cover disc, the mail-order devkit was never quite placed to democratise the process of game creation. Succeeded by the somewhat inaccessible PS2 Linux, it left more a void than a legacy. Given the ambitious reach of Microsoft's XNA platform (see **E**136), the potential was always there for the Redmond giant to live up to its motto of jumping in. Without so much as a hint, however, its decision to do so surprised everyone.

Announced during the company's August Gamefest event, where the Games For Windows initiative was explicitly pushed, XNA Game Studio Express wants to blow open the doors of amateur development to a worldwide audience. Now available as a freely downloadable beta, it's set to offer a helping hand to small-scale development projects by pulling them out of the concept stage and into manufacture. Coupling a fully documented toolset to XNA's existing framework of libraries (included in the package), the bottom line is that creating and sharing both Windows and Xbox 360 games has just become a whole lot easier. But while the concept of the PC-based distribution model was an easy one to grasp, it took a flurry of blog entries and an explanatory FAQ to express what this all meant for 360.

Set to offer a helping hand to small-scale development projects, the bottom line is that creating and sharing both Windows and Xbox 360 games has just become a whole lot easier



Garage Games, developer of Live Arcade title *Marble Blast Ultra* has migrated its Torque Shader Engine and Game Builder 2-D visual design tool over to Game Studio Xpress. It backs up the studio's claims of wanting to support indie game development



What was the hardware requirement? Who could play the finished games? What would it mean for Xbox Live Arcade? Would it be secure? Little was made clear at first beyond the existence of a 'Creators Club', a subscription to which ($99/£52 annually or $49/£26 quarterly) would leave users "able to build, test and share." But further details soon filtered through the MSDN (Microsoft Developer's Network). The beta will support coding of both PC and 360 titles, but will only execute the results on PC. An unfinished runtime environment released onto retail 360 consoles would, Microsoft says, present too great a risk to its as-yet uncompromised security core.

The finished toolset, expected before Christmas, will finally allow Creators Club members to compile and share their 360 games. The requirements for sharing are that the recipient be logged in to Xbox Live, have an active Creators Club subscription, have the XNA runtime environment installed on their machine and have the Game Studio Express software installed on their PC. All source code and content assets must also be shared. No Xbox Live support is available as yet, but the Professional edition of Game Studio, scheduled for a spring 2007 release, will include it as part of a more comprehensive suite tailored to the needs of the commercial user. Key to this is the facility for creating signed binaries (essentially retail as opposed to debug software).

As users get a handle on the toolset and its documentation, Microsoft's long-term ambitions for Game Studio will hopefully receive their own clarification. It's assumed that Xbox Live Arcade will remain unaffected, with an alternative marketplace potentially appearing for amateur content. Those authors still wishing to see their games distributed alongside *Geometry Wars* and *Hexic*, however, will be subject to the publisher's famously strict certification process.

At the time of going to press, further information was available through the XNA link at connect.microsoft.com

Data share

The MDSN forums are already alive with XNA discussion

Microsoft's XNA Developer Center is drip-feeding information onto the MSDN, but more is sure to come when the beta period ends. Here's what else is known so far.

- **Games created using Game Studio Express can't presently be shared via memory card**
- **A hard drive must be present on the retail 360 hosting the XNA runtime environment**
- **The initial 360 release is limited to games, while the PC version will be able to handle non-gaming applications**
- **Once a Creators Club subscription is up and running, the runtime environment must be downloaded from the Live Marketplace**



More than 200 volunteers ensured that the 5,500 attendees stayed networked, and the events prompt. Inset: No really, you can wake up now – a stage hypnotist was just one of the unlikely attractions

EVENT

QuakeCon holds its ground

Less conspicuous than last year's event, the original fragfest shows no signs of settling down



Without the high-profile return of its titular IP, or even an imminent console launch for John Carmack (left) to assess, QuakeCon 2006 captured just as many flags as it did last year, but only half the attention. Not that it made much difference to an event that's long been organised by its people, for its people, with little regard for anything beyond id Software and the genre it created. As the perennial Bring Your Own Computer events turned the halls of Dallas' Hilton Anatole hotel into a star-field of diodes and cold cathode lights, it was clear that the console world was of peripheral concern to a crowd who build next-generation systems on a yearly basis.

Peppered with references to id's upcoming, as-yet-unannounced project, Carmack's keynote was predictably even more soft-mannered than it was in 2005. That game, he suggested, will be an action title far removed from anything the company has developed previously, boasting large-scale outdoor environments and increased use of megatexture technology. Though its primary platform is PC, simultaneous Xbox 360 development was also confirmed, with both versions featuring dedicated multi-core processor support. Bugbears this year included the crawling progress of development software across the industry, but optimism prevailed with talk of potential DS games and the joys of mobile phone development.

A total of $100,000 was awarded to winners of the Nvidia-sponsored tournament events, while Bromley-based Splash Damage dominated this year's stage events with talks on both mod and commercial development, and demonstrations of id's upcoming super-soldier, *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

Continue



Projectors
Who needs a bigger TV? Just get a bigger flat

XNA Game Studio
Yet more good news for next-gen homebrew

Halo 2
Its ability to devour lunchtimes is undimmed

Quit

Bullying Bully
Let's wait till someone's played it, eh?

Glasses of water
And their proximity to vaulable bits of kit

.asx
Why can't Japanese websites use Quicktime?



Author: Julian Dibbell
Publisher: Basic
ISBN: 0 465 01535 2

PLAY MONEY

A year spent making money in *Ultima Online* is the backdrop of Dibbell's brilliant deconstruction of online games as real life

After a seemingly endless stream of mediocre books about the social impact of online games, it's a real relief to get stuck into Julian Dibbell's Play Money. Ironically subtitled How I Quit My Day Job And Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot, it's the record of Dibbell's year as an full-time(ish) online trader in the gold and items of *Ultima Online*. He starts out in high spirits, eager to fulfil his goal of making more money in the coming 12 months than he's ever made in his writing career. It doesn't take long however before that target of $56,000 is reduced to the more modest goal of at least once overhauling its monthly equivalent: $4,700.

For all the talk of online loot though, Play Money is important for deeper concerns. From initial fascination as he follows the ownership of one online tower, created by months of tedious play by a construction worker and finally bought for $750 by a Wonder Bread delivery man, Dibbell quickly moves into darker territory. The only way he can generate the margins he needs is to partner-up with some of *Ultima*'s more dubious traders. Two gold farmers work out an exploit Dibbell calculates generates them $160,000, and he's more than happy to take his cut as a fence. But there's also the knock-on effect of his new employment on his wife and young daughter to consider. Combined with flashes of dry humour and intelligent analysis, the result is surprisingly emotional. Highly recommended.



Author: Mark Chadbourn
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07800 6

JACK OF RAVENS

The first book in the remix of Chadbourn's work offers a more gritty take on a war between good, evil and indifference

Reading the first book in a fantasy series can feel like another nail in your coffin. Not only is there the tacit acceptance you're signing away chunks of your life, but such debuts often make for bumpy reading. Complaints include too much exposition and too little conclusion as the author tries to squeeze in backstory while leaving characters alive for the next books.

But Mark Chadbourn, who's already completed two trilogies, just jumps straight into the action in Jack Of Ravens, the opener of his Kingdom Of Serpents series. Jack Churchill (Church to his many friends and enemies) finds himself disorientated somewhere in Somerset. But there's good reason for his confusion. One minute he was fighting the Army of the Ten Billion Spiders in the early 21st Century. Next, he's 2,000 years in the past with a Celtic earth giant trying to kill him.

And it's this pace, as Jack flits between the land of the gods, Tuatha Dé Danann, and various periods of world history – Rome, Elizabethan England, the Great Exhibition and Haight-Ashbury in the '60s – that keeps the book humming. There's a good reason for Chadbourn's ease with his material, as Jack Of Ravens revisits the characters and worlds from his '90s series The Age Of Misrule. This time there's less mythology and more of a contemporary edge. Think the spirit of V For Vendetta mixed with Neal Stephenson's historicism and infused by the spirit of Shakespeare's Puck: a featured character certain to invigorate future books.

Lumines II and Lumines Live

FORMAT: PSP, 360 **PUBLISHER:** BVG/MICROSOFT



Mizuguchi's loosened grip has allowed this game of beat-rocking blocks to explode into a multiplatform franchise, but has it also lost control of that synergy between sound and play? US-friendly song changes on PSP and music video downloads on 360 could suggest a cynical marketing blow-out, or just a change of focus

Army Of Two

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



The brief sound of single-platform acolytes willing this to be PS3 exclusive was cut short by the inevitable confirmation of a 360 version, which happens to be the source of every asset released to date. Though EA's commitment to evolving co-op play remains unproven, the game's blockbuster production design is evident

Guitar Hero II

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** REDOCTANE



Anthrax, Mötley Crüe and Stone Temple Pilots were the latest leaks from the set-list at the time of going to press, bringing the total revealed to a cosmically significant eleven. Fifty-five multi-stream tracks should be available in the finished package, with parent publisher Activision yet to deny ports to Xbox or 360

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SOE



Bouncing between *Diablo* and *God Of War* for inspiration without settling into a place of its own, Sony's seemingly rushed launch title seems to expose the flipside of this generation's dynamic decoration of content. Naturalistic HDR, depth of field effects and realtime shadowing can't hide the rollercoaster of artistic design

Freerunning

FORMAT: PS2, PSP **PUBLISHER:** REBELLION



Finished prior to the acquisition of Core Design, *Freerunning* has the hazy, ink-saturated footprints of Rebellion's Asura engine all over it. But it's unclear how much technology, if any, has actually been shared. It would certainly explain the apparent ease with which this one-time PSP exclusive has jumped the gap to PS2

Gears Of War

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Epic wasn't offering prizes for those who guessed that its big August reveal would be a collision course with PS3's launch, but Emergence Day sent out ripples with another disclosed detail: the cost. The $70 price for its limited edition is no laughing matter, though talk of a Destroyed Beauty artbook still raised a chuckle

Bully

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** TAKE-TWO



Never mind the precision humour, pitch-perfect performances and crucial suggestion of Jimmy Hopkins as the cure rather than the disease, *Bully*'s return saw it marched once again to the office of headmasters Keith Vaz, Jack Thompson and the Bullying Online organisation. At least now they only have a PS2 release to protest

Sadness

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** TBA



The way Polish studio Nibris describes it, *Sadness* is an emergent gothic horror presented entirely in black and white, inspired by almost every survival horror game ever, and boasting a freehand hook so novel that they'll only risk discussing vague creature concepts. Not due until Q4 2007, it's hard to buy into its rhetoric

Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** TECMO



The latest word is that the game is playable, with TGS set to host the interactive premiere. The 60 per cent of code that's complete is said to comprise most of the new sports, with frontend, polish and updated beach volley events sensibly left until last. A revised lighting and shadowing system is hopefully part of the package



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The Blob

http://www.utrecht.nl/smartsite.dws?id=144982

If *The Blob* exemplifies anything, it's the assertion that serious games shouldn't have to be. Created by a joint team of students from the Netherlands' Utrecht School of the Arts and Utrecht University, the game's underlying purpose is to illustrate the planned ten-year reconstruction of the city's Central Station area. One might normally assume that to be strictly the realm of blueprint, scaled model or at best virtual fly-through, but instead the team asserted a game-plan that has tidily managed be both informative and entertaining.

The game's primary-coloured and smiling-sun-bright metropolis along with its central rolling mechanic brings *Katamari* comparisons (which the team happily accepts, though they admit none actually owns the game), but rather than levelling the city your task is to paint the town red – and blue, and green, and yellow – by rolling your gelatinous character over the rainbow-diverse citizens and belly-flopping against the surrounding area. It's a worthy download even if Utrecht remains well outside your future painted path.



Making space each year for the likes of Namco, Taito, Konami and the combined forces of Sega and Sammy, Tokyo's AOU show continues to represent one of the country's largest industry trade events

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Show and tell

What do the changes made to E3 mean for the games industry?

The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) which is in charge of the E3 show has announced a revised version of its event for July next year, and it won't be the huge festival it used to be. Instead, it is going to shift to a much more utilitarian style with various small private meetings and announcements. According to the Wall Street Journal, the show will leave LA's gigantic conference centre and rent two floors of a hotel. The number of people attending the event will be radically lowered from 60,000 to 5,000 and the date will move from May to July.

The reasons are that media, developers and retailers need more intimacy through closed-door meetings, and also that the growing costs couldn't be ignored. But while it is described as a 'change', people are in fact talking about a 'scaling down' of the event.

So just what is a game show? What is it about? If we have to classify these shows, we would have trade shows, media-oriented announcements and consumer events open to the public. There is also the case of companies currently on, or about to be introduced to, the stock market, who use those events to appeal to their current or future investors. There are conferences which specialise in the needs of game developers like the GDC (Game Developers Conference) or the ones focused on arcade games like the AOU show and the JAMMA show. They all feature exhibitions, conferences and small private meetings.

In America, E3 looks very much like a giant trade show focused on publishers and with a large number of announcements. In comparison, the TGS (Tokyo Game Show) is very different and almost nothing like a trade show. Media-oriented announcements are numerous but, basically, it is a very pure, consumer-focused event.

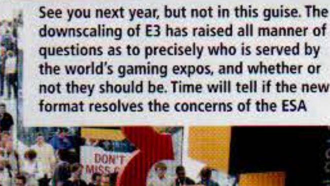
In Asia, it is very much about the Chinese ChinaJoy show, which is about online PC gaming. This fits a culture in China where piracy is so widespread that packaged games don't sell very well. But since there aren't many MMORPGs released in a single year, this event is very much like a festival. There are lots of stage events which are very theatrical and not all game-related. From a Chinese online game maker's point of view, this is some kind of fan service event. The Chinese market has grown fast but chaotically, and this is reflected in the ChinaJoy show which features

E3 looks very much like a giant trade show focused on publishers and with a large number of announcements. In comparison, the TGS (Tokyo Game Show) is very different and almost nothing like a trade show









See you next year, but not in this guise. The downscaling of E3 has raised all manner of questions as to precisely who is served by the world's gaming expos, and whether or not they should be. Time will tell if the new format resolves the concerns of the ESA





Held at Shanghai's New International Expo Centre, the ChinaJoy expo and conference is just four years old, but already plays host to over 200 visiting companies. As its territory would suggest, it deals primarily with MMOs

many different things from a trade show to the simple sale of goods. Basically, anything goes at this show. The South Korean GSTAR event looks very similar to the ChinaJoy – it is very much about online PC gaming, but there are some console and arcade games as well. In Taiwan, the Taipei Game Show is somewhere between the South Korean show and ours. But in comparison, there is a bigger retail section.

Since 1998, the UK focus was on ECTS. But in 2004, trade body ELSPA held the European Games Network trade show and the Game Stars Live at the same time. The result was that in 2005 ECTS disappeared. From this rather chaotic scene of game events in UK the London Games Festival has emerged, which will take place later this year. It includes the London Games Summit as well as GDC London.

Since 2002, the Leipzig Games Conference has taken place in Germany. It evolved with the rapid growth of the European gaming market and it feels almost like E3, but it is focused on the end users. Elsewhere in Europe, we find Game Connection in Lyon, France. It is a small event focused on meetings between developers, publisher and distributors. There are actually several of these small events – the show that takes place in Cannes (Milia) used to feature a lot lots of videogames but recently shifted its focus to mobile phones.

As you can see, and certainly already know, game shows come in various shapes and it is difficult to categorise them. I'm a big fan of these events. As long as my schedule allows me, I travel around the world to attend them. This 'change' to E3 seems to be the reaction of the US games industry to the reality of a market facing a level of growth which just isn't enough balance skyrocketing development costs. Should this be true it comes as a sad shock to those like us who love videogames, especially if it means the end of more of our much-loved game shows. See you!



Already high profile, TGS can expect more global attention after the E3 announcement. How this affects its peculiar audience of families and critics will soon become apparent

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin



Igarashi goes all period on us by setting the series in World War II. We're promised a whole new array of vampiric blood-spilling in what should turn out a worthy sequel.
DS, KONAMI

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption



Its slick, bright looks are appealing enough, but the real draw is the prospect of getting to test out the Wii's traditional gaming potential so early in its lifespan.
Wii, NINTENDO

Wii Sports



It may not all be confirmed yet, but the Wii launch list is looking fuller – and getting closer by the day. *Sports*, however, remains the no-brainer. Hopefully literally.
Wii, NINTENDO

Name calling

Is GTA really playing the DNA game?



Don't blame us for not having cracked the name. Dave Jones, who led the team who created the game that jumpstarted the trend – *Grand Theft Auto* – freely confesses he doesn't know either

Just Cause, Scarface, Crackdown, Dead Rising, Yakuza, Saints Row, Gangs Of London – oh, and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories*. And that's just in this month's issue: there's no question a genre has just come of age. Pity we still have no idea what to call it.

The '*GTA*-clone' – not that it was ever an elegant phrase – just won't cut it any more, not in the face of the extraordinary diversity listed above. And surely no one's seriously suggesting that we wrap our tongues around 'the free-roaming action adventure' from here on in. Or we could take a tip from the Germans: if for them platform games are 'run-and-jumps', perhaps we could have the 'drive-and-shoot'? Perhaps not.

But that last idea raises another problem. Possibly held back by the fact that we still don't have a name for it, it's still not really been agreed what the key components of the genre actually are. It needs to take place in a freely accessible world, but does that space need to be physically contiguous? It didn't seem to need to be in *Grand-Theft-Auto*-meets-Mars-Attacks *Destroy All Humans*. Does it have to include combat? Surely yes, but its absence didn't stop *Grand-Theft-Auto*-meets-The-Simpsons *Hit'n'Run* being widely claimed a clone. Does it even have to be driving *and* fighting? There's no question *Dead Rising* feels a little like it belongs, and yet it doesn't really meet that requirement. Perhaps, appropriately, the only way to judge them is like suspected alcoholics. If a game can tick three of the following boxes, then it qualifies: freely accessible play area, story missions and side missions, hidden packages and/or detailed stats, a civilian population to torment, some form of combat, some form of driving. Does that about cover it?

Of course, genres have always been problematic, and they've always had awkward names, but perhaps the *GTA*-a-like issue is so acute because it's the first true second-generation genre. The familiar roster (driving, shooting, platforming, strategy) are all built around the idea of a game focused on one type of interaction. But what we're talking about is a genre built out of *those* genres: a genetic inheritance. It's just unfortunate that it's a child that seems to be forever stuck with a double-barelled surname.



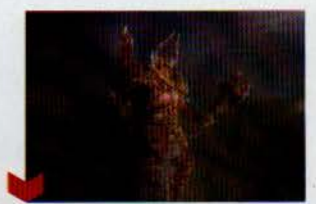
28 **Kane & Lynch: Dead Men**
360, PC

30 **Just Cause**
360, PC, PS2, XBOX



31 **Scarface: The World Is Yours**
PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX

32 **GTA: Vice City Stories**
PSP



33 **Warhammer: Mark Of Chaos**
PC



34 **Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death**
PC

36 **Bit Generations**
GBA



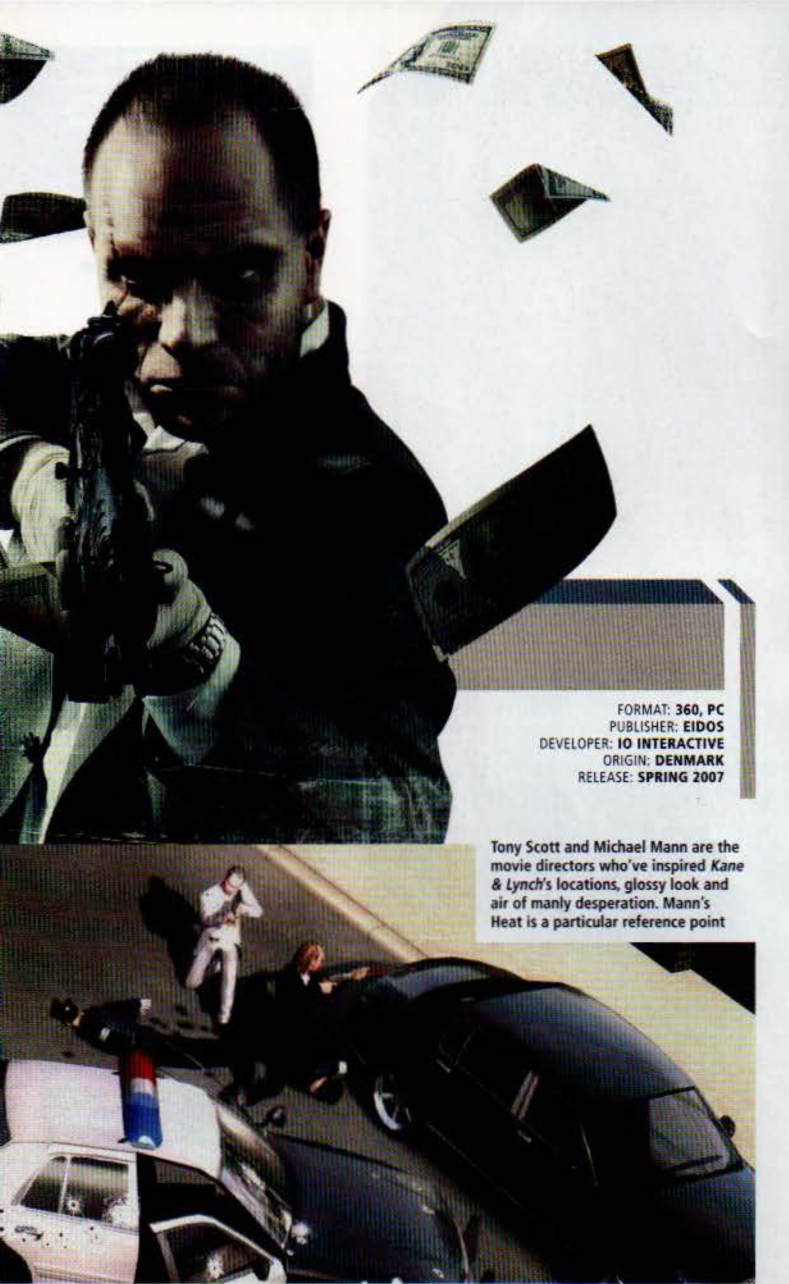
38 **Company Of Heroes**
PC

40 **TimeShift**
360, PC

40 **Colin McRae: DIRT**
360, PS3

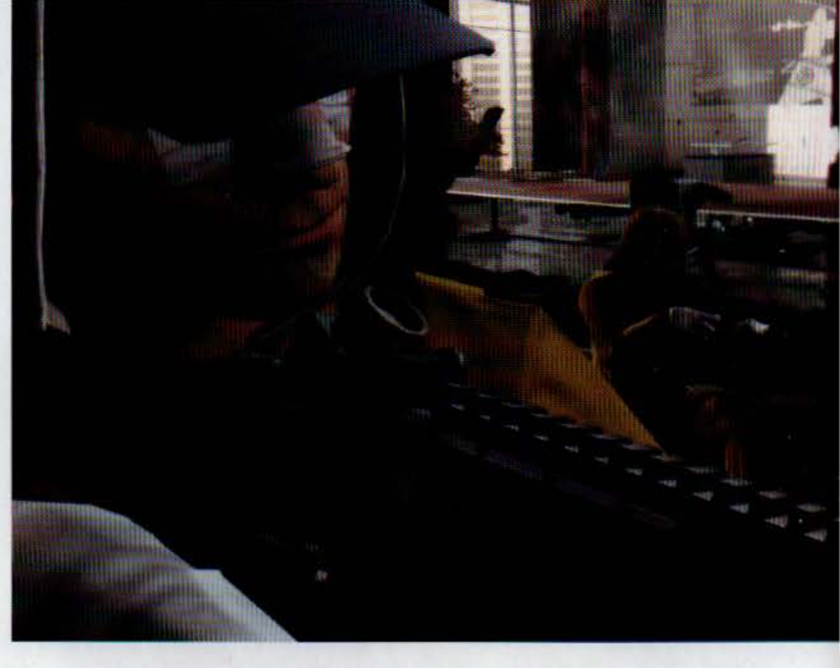
41 **Killzone: Liberation**
PSP

41 **Gundam: Target In Sight**
360, PS3



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2007**

Tony Scott and Michael Mann are the movie directors who've inspired *Kane & Lynch's* locations, glossy look and air of manly desperation. Mann's Heat is a particular reference point



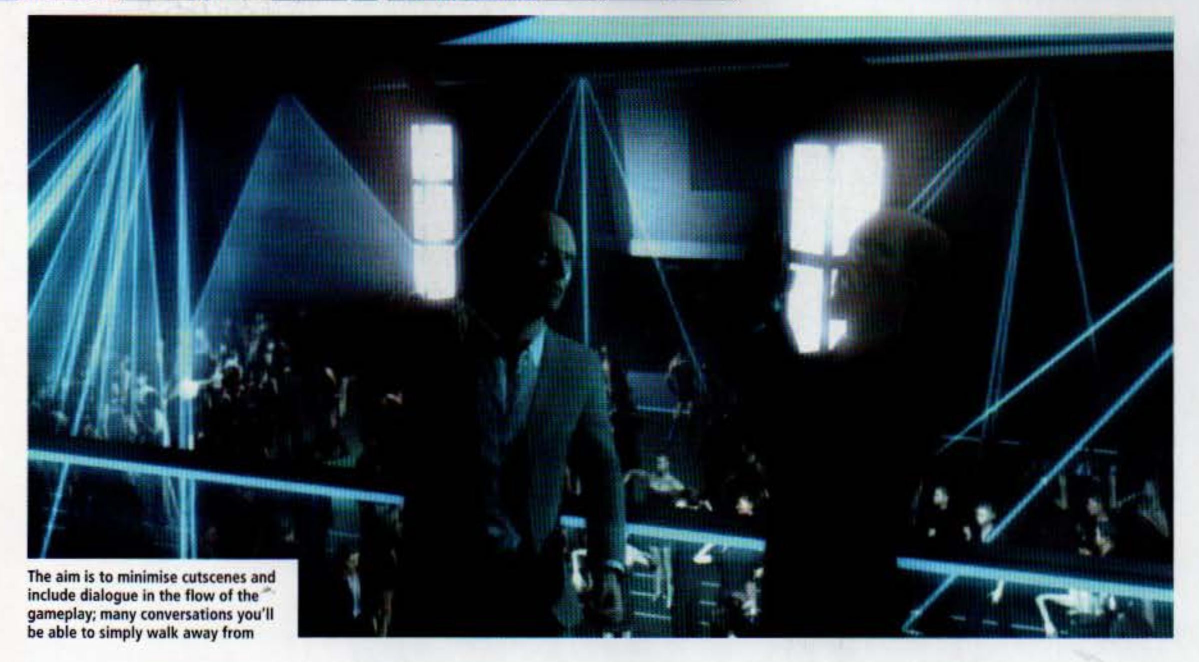
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

Io takes a second stab at squad shooting, but these two have a very different freedom fight on their hands

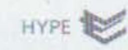
Freedom Fighters is held in a lot of affection by a lot of people, not least its makers. "Everybody [at Io Interactive] has such love for this game," says lead animator **Martin Madsen**. "But it was a shame, it felt like it was a bit overlooked, although the reviews were good." Its combination of ironic alternative history – charting a 'terrorist' resistance effort in a New York occupied by Communist Russia – and simple squad action won it a cult following that never quite converted to the crossover success of its stablemate, *Hitman*. Feeling it deserved better, the same team has elected to build a stylistically very different vehicle on the *Freedom Fighters* chassis for this spiritual successor on 360 and PC. But rather than retreat from cartoon insurrection to the usual militarist drill, it's changing tack with this dark, character-driven thirdperson crime thriller.

With two leads – hard-bitten mercenary Kane and unstable psychopath Lynch – the addition of a co-op mode is a given and comparisons with *Army Of Two*, also due next year, are inevitable. However, Madsen says co-op was never the motivation for making a two-hander, being more of a happy by-product of Io's desire to exploit the friction between two strong but flawed characters in the way films often, but games seldom, do. "We started with the idea of having this special tension in a relationship, with two people forced together who can't stand each other. We really thought there was something there to build on, and that sort of inspired the co-op mode." It's a refreshing step away from the lone, perfectly autonomous, crusading superhero of videogame-character cliché, and the plotting takes things a step or two further by putting the pair in a situation beyond their control and complicating their motives.

Kane is a former developing-world consultant – essentially a professional negotiator – who leaves his family and falls into the mercenary life after his son's accidental death; Lynch a troubled convicted murderer on medication. They are tied together by the Seven, an elite group of fanatical mercenaries for whom Kane must recover the loot from a botched job on pain of his family's death (his own death sentence is immutable). The Seven springs them both from death row and forces Lynch – their power over whom remains a mystery – to be Kane's watchdog.



The aim is to minimise cutscenes and include dialogue in the flow of the gameplay; many conversations you'll be able to simply walk away from













Io is striving to keep the display uncluttered, the better to exploit the graphics' cinematic sheen. Readouts will appear on request, but much feedback will be visual, *King Kong*-style, with a tilted, red-filtered camera angle when you're hurt



A skyscraper set-piece (top) is fast becoming obligatory (see *Splinter Cell Double Agent* and *Rainbow Six Vegas*). There's no doubting the vertiginous spectacle, but the other games' late-night neon gives them an edge

You'll only play as Kane in singleplayer, with Lynch a deliberately unpredictable, permanent AI presence, which should serve to spice up the sections when you play without a squad that were so arid and pointless in *Freedom Fighters* (although in the levels we've seen he's seemed pretty docile, if argumentative). Gaining playable access to Lynch will be a strong incentive to try co-op. Io aims to reflect his volatile psyche with some kind of rage-building gameplay device, but this will need to be carefully handled so as not to be a crass disruption to the game's moody, cinematic style.

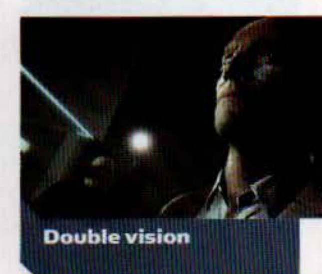
That style is evident in a two-handed Tokyo nightclub scene with a thronged dancefloor that recalls *Hitman: Blood Money*'s Mardi Gras. The subsequent skyscraper raid is more conventional, as Kane, Lynch and a pair of hired guns attempt to win back one of the loot briefcases from a Tokyo crime baron. But it serves to illustrate the simple, effective, single-button squad commands and smart companion AI that will be familiar to *Freedom Fighters* fans, and doesn't seem to have been complicated – if anything, it's even more streamlined.

Although you'll never be in command of more than four discrete units (including Lynch), the game will eventually build towards squads of 15 mercenaries whose questionable dedication to your questionable cause will have to tread a fine line between frustration and believability. Subordinates can be swapped at will between co-op players, providing a welcome extension of tactical freedom in that mode, but they won't be too clever. Madsen warns of the dangers of overly capable and free-spirited AI: "One of the rules that we have is that bots should never have more fun than the player. You will set the pace."

It's not the co-op, the multiplayer or the tried and tested team gunplay that will make *Kane & Lynch* stand out from the crowd. Its twin stars will do that job

Madsen and Eidos staff all refer to competitive online multiplayer with some excitement, promising an innovative setup that's true to the spirit of the offline game, but they refuse to divulge details for now. Until they do, the news that co-op is to be an offline, splitscreen affair will remain a severe disappointment; taking it online wasn't thought to be worth the development time.

But it's as Madsen said at the start: it's not the co-op, the multiplayer or the tried and tested team gunplay that will make *Kane & Lynch* stand out from the crowd. Its twin stars will do that job, and though they're drawn in fairly broad lines and the dialogue is hardly sophisticated – and on their own each would be pretty unremarkable – together they have an abrasive charisma that's hard to resist, and they double the intrigue in what looks to be a well-spun tale (see 'Double vision'). If the story itself can match the telling, and *Freedom Fighters*' quality control can be improved (especially with regard to enemy AI), *Kane & Lynch* should be a compelling and characterful thinking man's blast.



Double vision

There are signs that Io is making very astute use of the storytelling dynamics presented by having two main characters. Having one methodical, professional mercenary and one untutored thug has the benefit of making training missions a much less jarring jolt back to reality. Kane and Lynch's ignorance of each other's pasts will reflect the player's, allowing plot details and character backstory to be pieced together gradually and retrospectively, and for the most part during gameplay. It's reminiscent of one of the best examples of last-generation storytelling, Free Radical's *Second Sight*, only it doesn't have to resort to the old chestnut of amnesia to conjure a little mystery.



Most vehicles are very forgiving about being driven down near-vertical slopes, but if they do start to roll you can jump out and take to the skies with your 'chute



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 22**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Just Cause

More free-falling than free-roaming, will Avalanche Studio's adventure let you parachute to paradise?



Save our sanity

The biggest blot on *Just Cause's* sun-soaked horizon is its saving system. Although story missions are checkpointed, the rest of the game requires Rico to return – or warp via an emergency airlift – to a save point. It torpedoes your inclination to explore, since once you've finished one of the many side missions you'll find yourself wondering if you should go back and save rather than about what might be over the next ridge. For such a generous and modern-minded game it's an odd bit of old-school thinking, and one that may do lasting damage.

Whatever your tastes, there have long been games that feel like holidays, whether you're basking in the five-star luxury of *Dead Or Alive Beach Volleyball* or orienteering through the wilds of *World Of WarCraft*. But nothing has yet hit the holiday heights of *Just Cause*. The sky has never been so bottomlessly blue; the sea has never been stained so bright by a tropical sun; the shaded woods have never been so dazzlingly pierced by flashes of parakeet and butterfly. It's almost beautiful enough to distract you from the stunning audacity of the gameplay.

Knowing about it in theory is one thing: getting to grapple on to an enemy helicopter from the ground, swoop up onto its tail, dive nonchalantly into its cockpit – who cares that the rotors are in the way? – dispatch the pilot and take control is simply one of the best presents a game has ever given its players. And the other components of that freeform travel – car-jacking, the perpetual parachute, the planes, boats and bikes you can demand to be dropped from the sky at your convenience – stand up just as strongly.

But try to play *Just Cause* as you would another sandbox cars'n'guns adventure and it starts to fall flat. The world, as promised, is big, its many islands thick with rugged jungle and split by deep ravines and wide straits. Wander off, looking for adventure, and you're likely to find just the opposite. The complex local triad of drug cartels, bent cops and excitable revolutionaries means it's likely your journey may be peppered with gunfire, but it's easy just to shrug it off and keep on slogging through the forests and traipsing along empty beaches. But stick to the story missions and *Just Cause* comes into its own: there aren't enough raw ingredients here to create entertaining chaos on your own, but once the game adds in an objective and some opposition, it lifts the sometimes mundane tasks – assassinations, escort missions, delivery duty – into a pyrotechnic display of destructive improvisation, as you fluke and finesse your way to victory. Is your target's getaway car handing the hairpins better than yours? Then bail out and hurl yourself to the bottom of the cliff, before popping your 'chute at the last second and greeting his arrival with a grenade. Tiring of mounting a well-planned attack on a police compound? Then pinch a glider and land behind their defences with a rocket launcher and a smug grin. It's hard to think of a game that's ever managed to combine the risk of boredom and the possibility of excitement so inseparably. And doesn't that sound exactly like a holiday?





San Esperito's jungles are scored with roads and studded with cities (left), which give a different flavour to the combat, letting you choose between staying in the thick of the fray or retiring to a rooftop with a rocket launcher

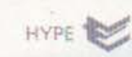


The huge size of the playfield means that finding a hideout – which you can warp to at any time you're not in combat – near an airport is an early imperative



The stylised take on the game's characters shows strongest in the cutscenes, and is rather hit and miss in its execution







Causing general chaos fills a white bar around the mini-map, meaning that the police will be on the lookout for Montana, attention that can be dissipated by fast-talking the cops



Scarface: The World Is Yours

Radical's latest bid to capture some of the highly-contested free-roaming turf asks players to work on their balls

With *Scarface*, a virtual circle of life is complete. The game of the era-defining gangster movie follows in the footsteps of the era-defining gangster videogame, which itself borrowed so heavily from such movies for its formations. The circle pulls in even tighter when you realise that so much of *GTA III*'s soundtrack appears, authentically, within *Scarface*'s dutifully expansive and iconic line-up of tunes.

And so, one circle of virtual life is complete, while another continues apace – this is Radical's fourth game based on an open-plan approach centred on guns and cars, more than most studios have yet managed, and that experience shows. It's apparent from the engine, which struts its stuff with an assertive draw distance that's rarely cluttered, detailed foliage, interior locations that require no loading and a sizeable number of destructible props.

It's just as confident with its ideas, giving the player reason to moderate their behaviour while cruising and exploring the four districts of Miami that Tony Montana is out to recapture. The concept of 'dirty' money is introduced, cash stolen from the corpses of gang members or earned from drug deals, that requires laundering at a bank in order to prevent it falling into the hands of the law upon arrest or being lost upon death, an all too swift pair of outcomes for the careless player. 'Gang Heat' is as important as police attention too, dictating just how much money can be made from drug deals within a certain region, another aspect that benefits from avoiding violence. Gunplay is simple but hard-hitting and, crucially, free from any clumsiness – one button for the responsive lock-on, another to fire and the right stick can be smoothly adjusted to designate a hit zone. Targets include, of course, 'right nut' and 'left nut'.

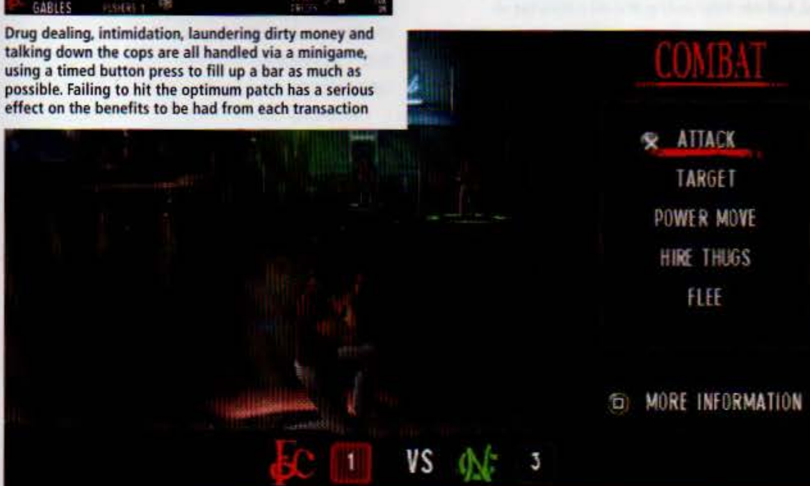
Drug dealing, intimidation, laundering dirty money and talking down the cops are all handled via a minigame, using a timed button press to fill up a bar as much as possible. Failing to hit the optimum patch has a serious effect on the benefits to be had from each transaction

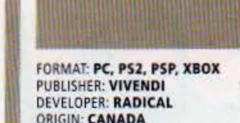


Montana can talk to any NPC he meets, reeling out a succession of context-sensitive lines. Successfully completing an entire conversation results in an extremely generous amount of Balls – perhaps due to the effort of maintaining one in the face of Montana's maniacal patter

Aside from the typical measures of money and respect, 'Balls' is the third component of *Scarface*'s economy, accrued through virtually all acts of bravado. From combat (with more Balls given for not using the lock-on, naturally) and taunts to the powerslides, near-misses and air-time spent in-car, to successful drug deals and intimidations. As well as unlocking certain portions of content, Balls builds up a meter that, when filled, can throw Montana into a blind rage, a temporary firstperson frenzy where all targets are auto-tracked and taken down in an instant while the health gauge refills. And the game's opening stage – the final scene of the movie – is the perfect tutor, dropping the player into a gunfight and ending with a cute touch, a mission report where Montana's stats are dropped to zero in preparation for the game's make-believe aftermath.

What's less assuring is the hint that, even early on, there's a toughness that's reminiscent of *The Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*'s demanding tasks, of missions that can quickly turn sour and force a return to the last checkpoint. The number of bodies and vehicles thrown at the player makes for some raucous confrontations, but a knowing game plan is essential for not getting mown down in a sudden commotion of bullets from all angles.



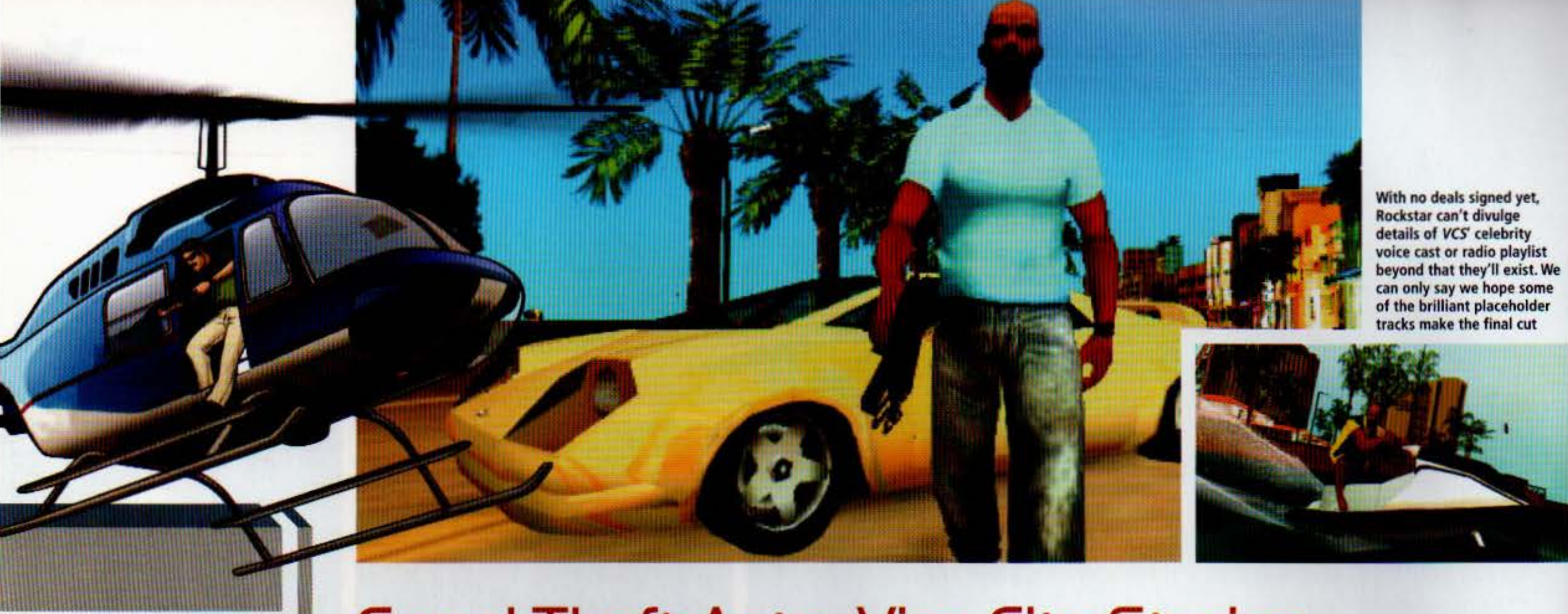


FORMAT: **PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E162**



Monkey hench

A pull-up menu allows the player to access the game's soundtrack at any point, even when on-foot, but its main functions are to provide information on the current state of Montana's 'Empire'. Unlocked content in the form of new henchmen, vehicles, mansion furniture and business ventures can be purchased, or a call for one of Montana's cars to be delivered to him on the spot, taxi-service style. Some of the more generic, to-and-fro missions expected from a game with such a structure as *Scarface* are tackled by switching to one of Montana's henchmen – a driver, assassin or enforcer – and completing their own exclusive set of jobs.



With no deals signed yet, Rockstar can't divulge details of *VCS'* celebrity voice cast or radio playlist beyond that they'll exist. We can only say we hope some of the brilliant placeholder tracks make the final cut

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR LEEDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 20**

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

The fifth GTA in a generation faces a fight – from its disciple and inspiration, rolled into one



Accidental anti-hero

Although Rockstar isn't talking plot yet, the biker mission shown to us suggests that Vic – on an easy posting in Vice City before the Marines ship him out – is being led astray by his lowlife brother Lance, whose motives are never quite what they seem. (The other mission in the demo has him doing some innocuous stunt work for a commercial.) With previous *GTA* protagonists enthusiastically pursuing a life of escalating crime for their own ends, long-suffering Vic could be just the kind of subtle shift we always wanted from the PSP's *Stories*.

How's this for a spot of intertextual pop-cultural mud-wrestling: at the end of this year, *Scarface* (previewed on p31), Vivendi's *GTA*-inspired extension of the Al Pacino film, will go head-to-head with Rockstar's prequel to its Scarface-inspired hit *Vice City*. One story extends forwards, the other back, and the two meet in the middle (circa 1984) in a muddle of dayglo Florida beachfronts and free-roaming swearing.





Vice City suits the PSP much better than windswept Liberty did, its vibrant neons, pastels and airbrushed sunsets burst off the screen and make the best of the clean, low-res textures. And this time, you'll get to see it from the air

It's hardly a level playing-field, mind: *Vice City Stories* has all big-name momentum, while the pretender has four times the formats (including PS2). Under the circumstances, Rockstar's contention that its PSP exclusive will outperform every other title for every other platform over an especially cutthroat Christmas is hard to credit, despite *Liberty City Stories'* quoted 50 per cent attach rate to UK PSPs. Given the huge sales of its PS2 port, a similar conversion looks like a dead cert in this case, although Rockstar would be mad to confirm it before the new year.

Like *Liberty City Stories*, the *Vice City* spin-off is being developed by Rockstar Leeds under North's watchful gaze. And again like the earlier game it winds the clock back a couple of years, presenting a slightly less glitzy town just before boom-time, where the gulf between rich and poor yawns wide. The grittier, more socially-aware setup recalls *San Andreas*, as does the new lead Vic Vance, US marine and brother of *Vice City's* Lance (and not just because of his skin colour).



A lot can change in a couple of years, and the younger Vice City will have a mix of familiar and unfamiliar landmarks; the construction sites, trailer parks and a *Warriors*-referencing Ferris wheel will fill in some blank spaces as well as bringing it a few notches downmarket

Feature-wise, *Vice City Stories* is as you'd expect, with a couple of nice surprises. Wireless multiplayer returns alongside a singleplayer game of equivalent scope to the original *Vice City*; transport options are greatly improved over *LCS*, including the ability to swim, the all-new jetski and, best of all, helicopters, flight having been made possible by improved draw distance and streaming efficiency in this version. Most importantly, the missions we see are put together with the casual flair none of Rockstar's imitators can touch, blending driving and gunplay and land, sea and air sections seamlessly, and ekeing novel challenges out of the simple sandbox toys (such as keeping a copter steady while Lance takes aim at a biker convoy).

Vice City Stories may not meet Rockstar's wild sales expectations at first, and it may well, unthinkably, end up in *Scarface's* shadow in the end-of-year charts. But there are signs that it has the some of the spark that *Liberty City* lacked, as well as the back-to-basics approach so appreciated by those fans overwhelmed by *San Andreas*, and you can be sure it will still be being enjoyed long after Tony Montana's day in the Florida sunshine has ended.



The thin, repetitive population was the clearest sign in *LCS* that *GTA* had had to be cut down to PSP size. Happily, the portable Vice City seems much more busy and diverse



Warhammer: Mark Of Chaos

Warhammer returns to the PC with a stronger emphasis on combat. But will its real struggle take place away from the battlefield?



Character models are detailed and well animated, particularly in conflict. Black Hole Entertainment is currently at work adding code that will scatter dead units' arms and legs about in the aftermath of a battle



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **BLACK HOLE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **HUNGARY**
RELEASE: **Q4**

Bringing Warhammer from the tabletop to the desktop is a delicate task, and its positives and negatives seem almost perfectly balanced. For every potential player engaged by the familiar licence, there's another one intimidated by it. Equally, whilst the Warhammer rules come with decades of refinement, the job of staking out fertile creative ground in such comprehensively imagined territory is daunting. *Mark Of Chaos*, therefore, has to choose its path well and tread carefully from the outset.

Acknowledging that many players found its previous RTS (2004's *Armies Of Exigo*) too difficult, the Hungarian developer Black Hole Entertainment has tried hard to make amends, providing multiple difficulty settings – the easiest of which will ensure victory to all but the most strategically-impaired. But accessibility is not just a case of tampering with the challenge. By toning down resource management aspects to put a sharper focus on battling, *Mark Of Chaos* aims to create a simpler game, and it's also eager to forge a stronger sense of identification between a player and their army.

Crucial to success in this area is the introduction of champion units, single characters who dwarf the other pieces clustered around the battlefield. Boldly animated grotesques, champions can collect and use items as well as boosting the morale of the units they're attached to. Their powerful attacks make them a central part of any strategy, and their personalities will shape the strong storyline the developer is promising. They also bring their own skill-trees ripe for developing, and linking the right champion to the right unit for maximum effect promises to be an enticing process of trial and error.

Champions are central to another of the game's concerns: improvements in AI. Alongside psychological elements such as troop morale, a new 'aggro' system is in place, which ensures that enemies will no longer attack the unit nearest to them, instead aiming for whoever's causing them the most damage – regardless of how far away they are. It makes for impressive viewing and, if well implemented, provides plenty of potential for long-range strategy.





Although players will initially choose between Empire or Chaos armies, two more fully playable races – High Elves and Skaven – will be introduced later. Troops can also be bolstered with mercenary units such as Orcs or Vampires





A recently added element is the Deployment Phase, which gives players time to set out units before the fighting starts. Magic has to be carefully apportioned between all units, adding another element of strategy

In keeping with its tabletop origins, there's a strong theme of customisation running through *Mark Of Chaos*. Units can be individually 'painted', and banners can be designed from scratch. As with the rest of the game, these tools offer quick choices for the novice player while holding back a wealth of options for those eager to delve in deeper.

What's most notable about *Mark Of Chaos* so far is the extent to which the IP permeates the game: deeper than a simple bolt-on licence, it brings a rich history and depth to the action. The remaining months until release will show whether Warhammer's internal politics can be brought into play without creating a mess, and whether the game can welcome new players in without too much compromise.



On the tactical map, villages provide an opportunity to upgrade spells and weapons, as well as buy additional information about the campaign, or unlock new missions

Warhammertime

Showmanship seems likely to play a big role in the online multiplayer battles. The developers have confirmed that complete replays of previous battles can be saved as surprisingly small files, and then emailed to other players. Whether this will be used as a training tool for serious clans, or simply to provide a cheap laugh over some of the more asymmetric conflicts, it shows commitment to nurturing an online community around the game.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **SUMO DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E162**

Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death

Will the latest instalment prove more likely to break hearts or faith in the adventure game's 3D future?

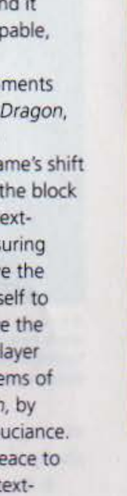


Angel Heart

***The Angel Of Death's* first real shock doesn't come in its opening cutscene, which depicts the ancient sacrifice of a young woman and the unleashing of the winged skeleton after which the game is named, but in George's early encounter with a sassy and beautiful blonde. For those whose hearts still belong to Nico, any sign of a spark between the pair is likely to be greeted with a gallic tantrum of which Mme Collard would be proud, but nonetheless they'll have to brace themselves for George to follow his heart. The blonde, conveniently, is on the run from the mob and in possession of a cryptic medieval manuscript and needs George's help with both. You may want to brush up on the history of the 14th century papal schism if you want to speed them on their way.**

It shouldn't be a surprise, really, that ten years on from its debut *Broken Sword* is beginning to resemble the series' recurring hero, George Stobbart. After three previous adventures, spanning most of the globe and all of a decade, it's clear that something of George has rubbed off on this latest instalment, so now both he and it share the same traits: intelligent, capable, handsome and confident.

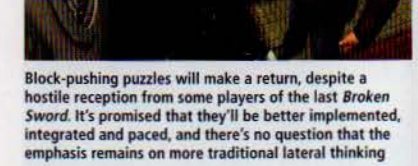
Confidence first: the accomplishments of last *Broken Sword, The Sleeping Dragon*, were self-evident, but there was no disguising the anxiety behind the game's shift to 3D. The awkward integration of the block puzzles, the elaboration of the context-sensitive controls and the over-reassuring twinkle of interactive objects all gave the impression of a game falling over itself to placate a sceptical audience, to solve the problems of the player before the player could get on with solving the problems of the game itself. *The Angel Of Death*, by contrast, has an air of absolute insouciance. The empty interface leaves you in peace to enjoy the atmosphere, and the context-sensitive controls present a single best-guess option (nearly always correct) when you select an object to use. The controls accommodate both point-and-click and direct movement, and although those more used to action games may take a little time to adjust, there are no grounds for finding *The Angel Of Death* anything other than graciously obliging.



Intelligent? It takes no time at all for the game to start demanding some gentle mental juggling as you consider the possible permutations of grandfather clocks, cigarette lighters, deathwatch beetles and Elvis-obsessed gangsters. The story, of course, doesn't matter. Not because it won't be integral to the game, deviously plotted and elegant scripted but because, thisbeing a *Broken Sword* game, it's guaranteed to be all three.

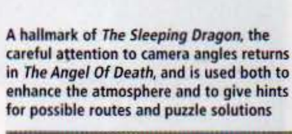
And yes, despite not hitting the highs of the hi-def revolution, *The Angel Of Death* is a handsome game. Indeed, if anything threatens to hold it back, it's that its eye for detail and uniform solidity will leave some players frustrated that they can't go where they please and use whatever they can see. That visual consistency comes courtesy of Sumo Digital, which is creating the game under the direction of the now-independent Charles Cecil, and the quality of its technology, proved in games like *OutRun 2* and *Coast To Coast*, is what makes *The Angel Of Death* so capable.

But, despite these admirable qualities, it's almost certain that they won't change the minds of those for whom the appeal of traditional adventure games has always been incomprehensible. Nonetheless, at a time when other adventure standard-bearers, like *Fahrenheit* and *Dreamfall* are turning away from the puzzle in order to enhance the cinematic experience, it's heartening to see that someone still believes that the emphasis in the adventure game genre can remain on the game.

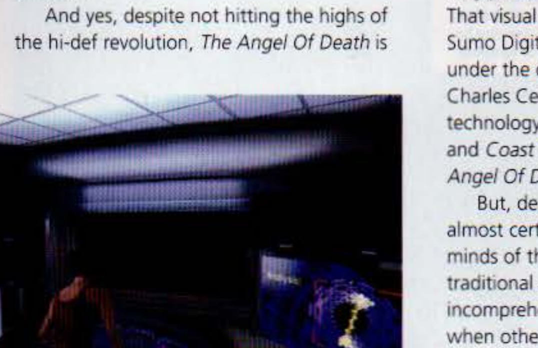


Block-pushing puzzles will make a return, despite a hostile reception from some players of the last *Broken Sword*. It's promised that they'll be better implemented, integrated and paced, and there's no question that the emphasis remains on more traditional lateral thinking





A hallmark of *The Sleeping Dragon*, the careful attention to camera angles returns in *The Angel Of Death*, and is used both to enhance the atmosphere and to give hints for possible routes and puzzle solutions



The arrival of a new woman in George's life (see 'Angel Heart') doesn't mean that old flame Nico is banished from the scene. Details of how the love triangle plays out are understandably scare, but it seems likely that *The Angel Of Death* will put paid to the idea that games can't 'do' romance.



FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **VARIOUS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E165, E166**

Bit Generations

Colour, sound, shape and velocity – Nintendo's second series exploits fundamentals of form to create the next generation of play



Generation gap

It's currently anyone's guess as to whether we'll see further instalments in the Bit Generations line, with unconfirmed sales reports putting the initial uptake of the first set in the low thousands per volume. It's clear that Nintendo is relying on a long-tail word of mouth approach to the series, though, with its early campaign sending free copies of the games to users willing to post comments about them on the series' site (http://bit-g.jp), and in certain circles that word of mouth has been quite strong.

As an experiment, the campaign has been one of the year's most surprising successes, especially for a series that appeared all but lost, taking Nintendo's long established penchant for accessible all-ages casual play and applying a masterful stroke of artful abstraction over top – a trend we hope will continue, with or without the Generations label.

As predicted in our coverage last issue, the second series of Nintendo's boutique imprint has taken the retro expressionism and glitched beats of the first and dialled it up even further with four more volumes of purist abstraction.

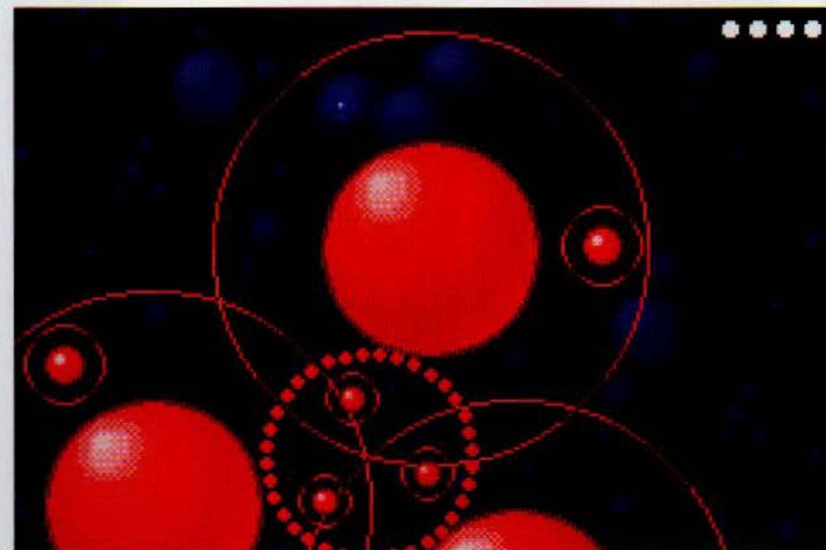
This series' *Dialhex, Coloris* is the most accessible of the designs. Starting with a grid of coloured blocks shaded according to gradient hues, the player must tint blocks toward one of the gradient's ends to, say, redden or yellow orange shades in between and create three alike. Your only opponent in this mix and match is an encroaching set of grey blocks which must be broken by creating adjacent matches. This continues across an increasingly stylised set of skinned stages until the linear gradient blossoms into a full colour wheel, evolving into a far more involving game of complementaries and contrasts: an exceptional twist on block puzzle convention.

Soundvoyager's visuals-optional and headphones-required approach has proven less challenging than initially expected, as you sweep a controllable orb across a frequency scanner of silence, hunting for faint traces of beats and loops which, when captured, compound into shifting and morphing dub and electronica soundscapes. More leisurely than the other selections in the series, with fail states limited to minigame sound-chasing interludes, riding the main voyages' warm sonic waves is a richer experience with your eyes closed – with little loss, since its visual feedback is limited to an aligning grid and pulsating sparkles denoting an approaching sound.

The monumental demands of *Orbital*'s game of momentum, on the other hand, have eclipsed expectations. Combining disparate shreds of *Lunar Lander* and *Katamari Damacy* and wrapped in two-tone concentric-crop-circle galactic design, your star's trajectory can only be influenced through a red or blue Doppler shift pulling you toward or away from the gravitational mass of larger stars. Locking your orbit with other planetoids increases the size of your own until you can merge with a glowing yellow sun. The most difficult selection of the entire series, as misjudged shifts frequently result in frustrating lulls adrift in deep space with no surrounding objects to play off.

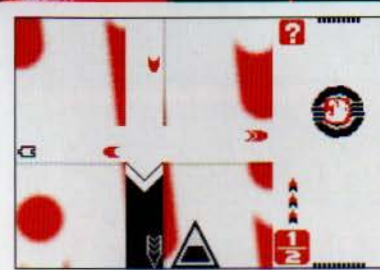
The set's true standout, however, is *Digidrive*, every bit as elusive and obscure as earlier screenshots would have you believe. Defying simple description as much as comparison, it's essentially a game of sorting where variously shaped vehicles can be directed to one of four crossroad posts and stacked to generate fuel reserves. Special ambulance vehicles intervene to deliver the fuel and accelerate a puck further away from advancing spikes which end the game on contact. Like a 27th century, thrice-abstracted Game & Watch hit, it's a slow-burn simplistic start to an increasingly franticly paced finish, with rules only comprehensible when you think them through rather than simply succumbing to the game's abstract hypnosis, perfectly embodying and drawing to a close the Bit Generations mantra.

The appearance of each additional grey block in *Coloris* (above) is accompanied by a panic-inducing orchestral hit pealing like the terrifying voice of a god, especially when struck in rapid succession – it's in stark contrast to the regular placid tonal chirps of the falling blocks

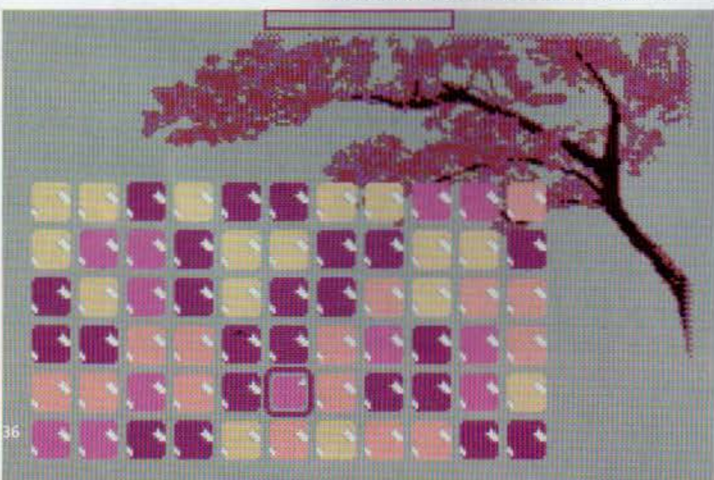


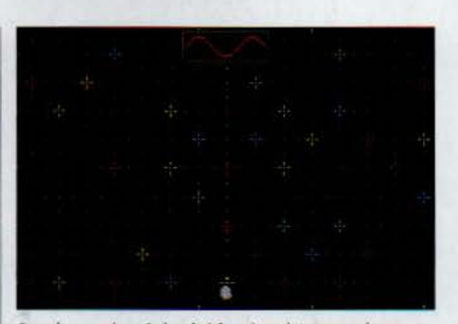


Though it's neither natural nor easy, mastering the gravitational pull and arced momentum of *Orbital*'s gas giants (above) is its greatest reward, and essential for surviving later clustered, constantly shifting systems



Digidrive's versus mode, either against the CPU or another player, is similar to singleplayer, but expands the puck metaphor into a back and forth sumo match to stock up enough energy to push the puck over the line





***Soundvoyager*'s main levels (above) are interspersed across a branched tree, with each path splitting into a pair of minigames involving pursuing or avoiding oncoming sounds down crowded roads, or – as in the unfortunately titled Sound Cock – chasing down the disembodied voices of farm life**

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **RELIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Company Of Heroes

Realtime strategy specialist Relic aims a howitzer at the genre. It hits

It's rare to find a game that feels this visceral – that transmits the pulse of violence from the screen straight to the player's gut. Rarer still to find it in a strategy game, where that player is usually hovering above the action, remote and removed in his all-seeing glass eye.

But this is an RTS in which every shell leaves its commanders wincing, every direct hit eliciting a cheer or a cry. The last game to manage that was Relic's own *Dawn Of War*, a game that has, quietly, become the number one choice of the online RTS community. *Company Of Heroes* is that game, squared. A game that pushes players out of their bases and onto the battlefield from the first moment of engagement. A game that revels in the violence of war and the sheer slapstick comedy of watching toy soldiers catapult into the sky. It's a game that is well balanced and nuanced, allowing constant improvisation in the face of fire.

So: Axis and Allies fight for France. Each must set out from their base to capture control points dotted around the towns and countryside. These control points grant their owner fuel, munitions and man-power – an abstract way of controlling the flow of resource into battle. Each player builds, men, tanks, artillery from their base, and marches to war. There is one victor, and all players pile out to a stat screen. So far, so RTS.

However, underneath the technology and staid genre template, Relic has worked on the basic movement of PC strategy games. When a player directs troops to an area of the map, they'll advance using cover, hiding behind walls and dashing into ditches. Tanks take a different approach, charging through walls and knocking down buildings. But they're not invincible: hold down the mouse-button and you can order the driver to face in the direction of fire – placing his strongest armour forward. The same can be asked of mortar teams, snipers, anti-tank guns, machine gunners and fortified emplacements. Suddenly, skirmishes are no longer decided by how many tanks join in the rush, but where they're placed. Combine this with a stupidly explosive battlefield – where cover appears from blown apart houses and craters and where every minute a change in the terrain in front of you provides an opportunity to exploit – you have a *real* strategy game.

It's in that confluence of drama and decision that *Company Of Heroes* excels – the troops pinned under a mortar barrage, saved by a sniper; the jeep careering out of control, splashing off a bridge; the Sherman gunner firing wildly at a Goliath remote-control bomb. All that's missing is the real reinforcements: the players.

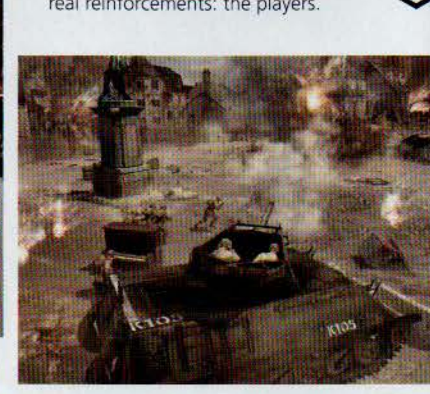
American tanks are a little cheaper and less well protected than the German Panzer divisions. It's much easier, though, for the allies to flank their opponents, hitting them in the rear where their armour is weaker



Machine gun and flak emplacements are able to 'pin' enemies down. Troops under fire will duck their heads and refuse to move until their commander clears a path



The drivers of fast, light scout vehicles like the Allied jeep and Axis motorbike and side-car are easily killed, leaving a swerving, out of control missile barrelling toward your troops – albeit one beautifully reflected in any surrounding water





Power of words

The RTS player's obsession with special abilities is well catered for in *Company Of Heroes*, with each side able to compete in three tech trees, similar to *World Of WarCraft*'s talent system. High-level axis players are able to call down V1 rocket strikes (leaving molten craters in the ground) or a Tiger veteran and his monster tank to turn the tides. Nothing, though, can quite match an intensive leaflet-dropping campaign, which causes allied soldiers to flee in panic.

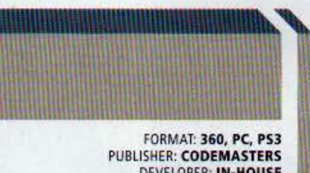
FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E147, E157**

TimeShift

The clock catches up with Saber's repeatedly delayed FPS







TimeShift **has always had a distinctively rebellious approach to the FPS's school uniform of greys and browns. Some may find the result a little brash, but any relief from sludgey monotony is welcome**

Are you a physicist? No? Good. Then there's a chance you might be able to enjoy the cheerfully absurd implications of *TimeShift*'s temporal twists. Use your special powers to slow down time, and you can weave deftly across moving platforms whose true speed would leave you dizzy. Stop it, and water becomes solid and fire is robbed of its ability to burn. Reverse it, and you can watch the participants of an ambush spool back to their hiding places before nipping round the back to shoot them in the head – just don't try to kill any of them before the time flow returns to normal, or the game will give you both a dressing-down and a headache as you try to figure out why it's suddenly developed a conscience about breaking the underlying laws of the universe.

Are you a historian? No? Good. Then you probably won't remember *TimeShift*'s rather troubled past. Debuting in **E**147 as an ambitious Atari game, it returned in **E**157 having lost its focus and any encouraging signs of progression and returns here (which with appropriately clockwork precision is **E**167) on Vivendi's roster. The change seems to have re-energised it, and stripped away some of its pretensions, suggesting instead a more tongue-in-cheek take on its sci-fi story. The news that Michael Ironside and Dennis Quaid have been recruited to its cause hopefully indicates that whatever the tone, the voice acting should be able to handle its demands.

The timeshifts of the title don't just add an extra dimension to the gunplay. Since the story also sees you sent back in time and then forward again to an alternate future, don't expect your allies to recognise you when you're reunited

What's less clear is if *TimeShift* has enough substance to back up the distraction of its time-teasing USP. Earlier builds demonstrated neither much sense of ballistic feedback nor enemy AI, but, on first inspection, the new incarnation seems to offer hope of a more solid and satisfying shooter. So, even if it has little hope of troubling the genre's increasingly rarefied elite, it seems that *TimeShift*'s year-long delay has been a worthwhile bit of time travel. Whether or not that will be enough to let *TimeShift* stand a chance in the on-coming Christmas rush (and yes, that rush does now start in September), only time, aptly enough, will tell.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2007**

Colin McRae: DIRT

After a generational pit stop, can McRae indulge a TOCA-style taste for variety and still remain on track?

Whilst Colin McRae's championship rallying career may have come to a standstill, his driving franchise races on and, more than that, on to next-gen. Promising to evolve the series by including a wider range of off-road vehicles and courses, *DIRT* sets in motion a very slight move away from its traditional rally-specific offerings.



Colin McRae 2005 **introduced a smattering of natural aspiration off-road vehicles, perhaps hinting at** ***DIRT*****'s intended direction. It's not known yet if the classic ice and tarmac rally tracks will complement the dirt**

Strategically designed to reinvigorate massmarket appeal (and accessibility) it will be interesting to see how newer aspects of the game compare to the familiar mud-and-spoilers action that made McRae's videogaming name. For purists, the game retains its point-to-point race structure and still offers a significant amount of traditional rally simulatio. But what existing fans will most want to know is where difficulty levels are set: whether, in an attempt to attract a wider range of players, gameplay challenges have suffered.

Not much is known about the exact format – little more than a handful of screenshots have been revealed so far – but on past form there's every reason to expect the soundness and solidity of previous *McRae* efforts. Preceding iterations have managed to substantially update physics and handling with each subsequent release, so the increased capabilities of new hardware should lift the game to a new level.

With all eyes geared towards the glamour of *Gran Turismo* and with appetites already whetted by the sheen of *PGR3* (not to mention the distractions of *TOCA Race Driver 3* and *GTR2*), it's tempting to feel that *DIRT* runs the risk of being undervalued. But as racing games increasingly position their focus on photorealism, any diversion from the resulting lap-counting is more than welcome. And, at a time when track racing is getting all the attention, it's good to see its dirtier cousin standing a chance of reclaiming the spotlight.





Colin's first next-gen outing is certainly looking to live up to its name, promising as much dusty airtime as ***Motorstorm*****. As these screenshots show, the player will no longer have just the clock for company while racing**



Killzone: Liberation

Boasting military design precision, a handy slice of Guerilla warfare to catch you off guard

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **GUERILLA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **HOLLAND**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

You can sling as much mud as you like at *Killzone*, but it won't stick – you'll swear it's absorbed. After one imperfect game and an artist's impression of a sequel, Guerilla's chronicle of the war on Vekta has become a kind of immovable object, a dozen times greater than the sum of its parts. Something in its patchwork of suicide missions, poisonous battlegrounds and emphatic spectacle manages to simply devour criticism. It really is a triumph of the will, not to mention Sony's wallet.

An abundance of *Liberation* screens and Q&As, however, have only partially hinted at how different it is. Despite obvious deviations such as a top-down camera and tactical play, much is retained. Helghast dialogue is equal parts instruction and exclamation, barked at a single pitch that almost shears the colour from the terrain. But those expecting wall-to-wall chaos – a game where performance is as unpredictable as event – should brace themselves for an unpredictably thorough exercise in precision and polish.

Exercising uncanny insight into how and when to double up functions on buttons, and buttons into advanced yet intuitive tactics, this is a fiercer handheld experience than its tiny characters should be able to sustain. And it has a great sense of rhythm – funnelling most of its fighting into narrow gantries, corridors and trenches, it turns a simple game of duck and fire into something intricately staged yet spontaneously explosive. As an interpretation of FPS action, it threatens to have more success from afar than *Killzone* did at close range.

But it's a slow burner, taking a good few missions to flex both its credentials and visual strength. Once there, it might also prove an acquired taste for those reared in the nanny state of modern games: *Liberation* makes its strategic requirements clear with fixed spawns, cover points and exploding barrels, and expects you to pay attention. Like *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, it's a game in which losing is over half the fun, and battling to victory a greater reward. Should the yet-unseen second half, together with its co-op, competitive and game-sharing multiplayer modes meet or even raise that bar, then victory of its own is assured.



Ironically enough, there are times when the distant camera feels damagingly claustrophobic, its downward gaze incapable of spotting enemies from afar. But it's a momentary complaint, the game's intelligent pans towards closing Helghast troops, dogs and droids maintaining a sense of awareness

Gundam: Target In Sight

Namco Bandai intends to walk tall with a flagship next-gen release. But then the bigger they are...

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

The layered intricacies of the Gundam universe can be lost when distracted by its major hook: it's about big robots. But in Japan at least, IP doesn't come much bigger than this: a franchise so important it even has its own museum.

Slowly building momentum over the last few E3/TGS events, *Gundam: Target In Sight* was originally billed as a PS3 flagship release. It's now been revealed that the game has been developed on 360 as well, differentiated from the PS3 version by an emphasis on online play. Nothing is known about the backstory, but screenshots seem to portray a traditional thirdperson shooter-cum-brawler involving a conflict between the Earth Federation and Zeon characters. Post-apocalyptic backgrounds reinforce the war theme, with AI tanks and planes finding themselves caught in the action.

The rapturous Japanese response to what's been seen does, however, seem a little out of keeping with the screenshots so far released. If the reported level of unbridled realism and super-high quality textures are present in the finished product, it isn't translating in the stills Namco Bandai has made public. Although the models have a fine sense of detail and a hulking sense of weight, backdrops seem astonishingly drab and basic.

Gundam's presence on the PS3 seemed to be so exclusively assured that the announcement of a 360 version is significant in itself. The intention to concentrate on Live play seems to indicates either a shift in Japanese expectations of the service or wider anticipation of western success.



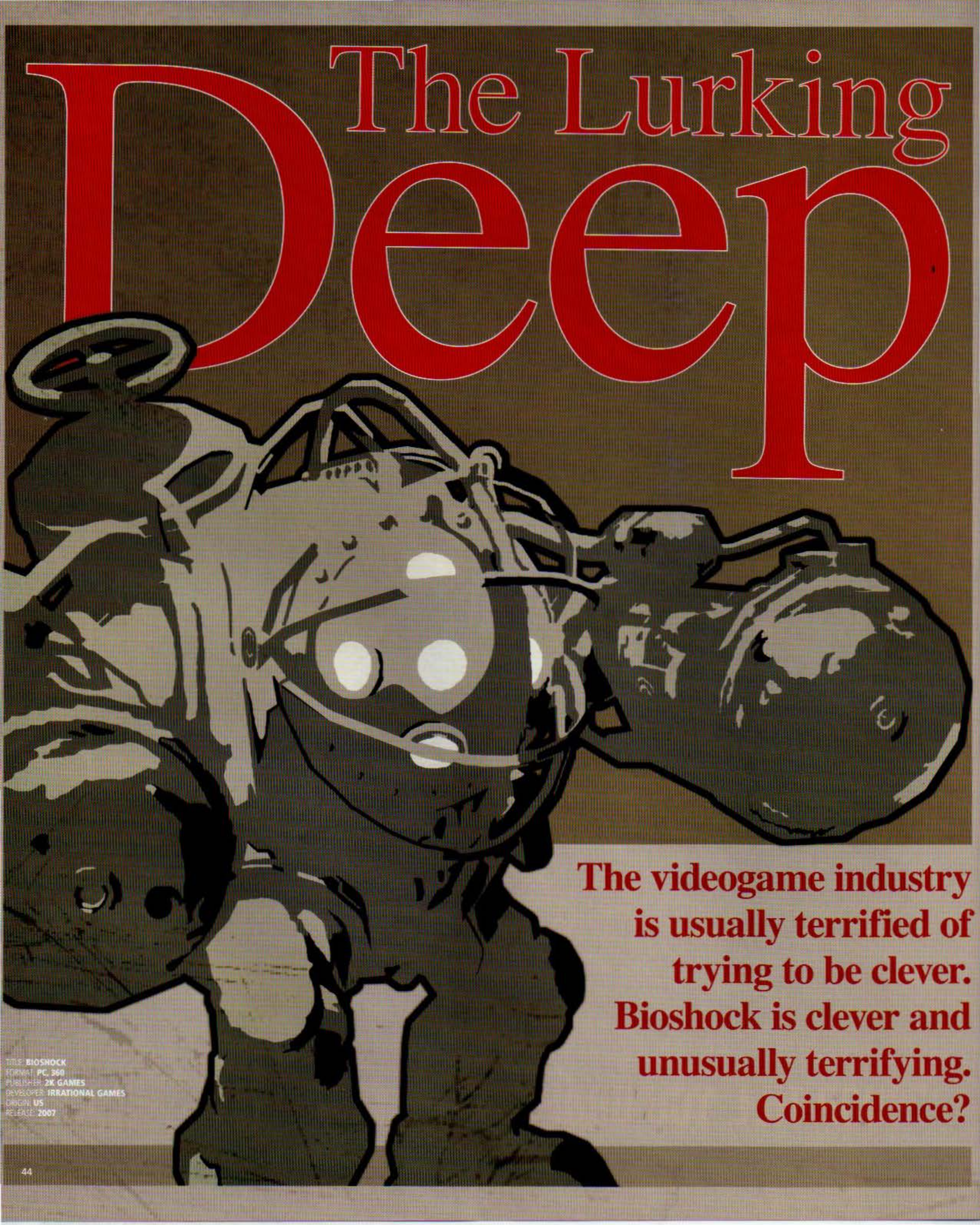
It will be interesting to see how far you'll be able to take alliances in online play, but whatever the game mechanics, combat clearly has massive potential. Visually, however, the game isn't doing much to aid Sony's battle to convince the world that PS3 games will easily outshine 360 projects



This drab, uninspired desert background does nothing to reinforce the scale or grandeur of the Mobile Suits involved. Fans of the blindingly colourful anime will also notice a muting of its hues. It is, to be fair, an ongoing work in progress

The Lurking Deep

The videogame industry is usually terrified of trying to be clever. Bioshock is clever and unusually terrifying. Coincidence?



TITLE: **BIOSHOCK**
FORMAT: **PC, 360**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2007**

Psychopathic holidays. It's not a perfect definition of videogames, but it's one of the few that manages to capture the contrast of escapism and obsession that many titles provoke; one of the few that illuminates the space that games often work within.

The man who's just coined the term is eager to expand on the subject: "In games, you're quite often doing things that you wouldn't do it real life," says **Ken Levine**, creative director at Irrational Games. "Games often have the effect of putting you in a world where that doesn't matter because the world has most of its morality sucked out. When you're playing *Doom* it's hard to even think about morality because there's no standard of morality in the world."

A recurring theme in his conversation, Levine's not talking about all that games could be, but rather what they so often end up as. Irrational's next title is an unashamed attempt to move things forward. Eschewing the jungles and factories of many an FPS, *Bioshock* takes you somewhere undeniably new: to Rapture, a '40s utopian city beneath the sea that has fallen into disrepair. The game boasts a memorable Reform Club ambience: brass, parquetry and art deco stylings vying with neon signs for control of the screen. Yet, as the city's name hints at an unbalanced mix of idealism and mania, Rapture's experimental society has turned in on itself. Rotting bodies litter the chequerboard floorings, and young girls known as Little Sisters harvest the corpses for precious genetic material, protected by Big Daddies, the hulking Vernian nightmares that amble and thud through the midnight spaces.

Despite the ease with which *Bioshock* reshapes FPS conventions, Levine is eager to keep the game's flights of fancy in check: "Whenever you hear a story about a game designer who's got a notebook of his world which he's been designing since he was 12 years old, get very nervous. He's got a story to tell, and he should be writing a fantasy novel or something. At the end of the day, everything's got to serve the game." This may seem odd coming from a developer whose primary claim to fame is the strength of its stories, but Levine's starting point is always the gameplay itself. "That's what I hang everything else on. Gameplay, and then theme, and then characters and motivation, and then you have the elements of your story."

It's a process in which the narrative serves the game rather than overwhelming it, yet Irrational can still claim a recognisable style. "I'm a pretentious jerk," jokes Levine, "so I write things that pretentious jerks like myself would come up with. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes I'll write a story and nobody cares."

Bioshock's plot has come a long way from its original World War II setting, but the mention of those early ideas draws a sigh from Levine: "The WWII thing was, frankly, that I had this press thing coming up and, as a story guy I am really really lazy. I just didn't have my act together yet. It took some time for everything to really form. We started really thinking: 'Why would this place exist?' It all came out of that: the time period, the people who created the place, the look, the feel, the philosophy behind the characters. It all came organically once we had this underwater city.

"It's very hard for me to construct a story that doesn't have a theme," continues Levine. "Otherwise I don't know what I'm supposed to be writing. The theme of *Bioshock* from the story perspective is extremes of ideology. And I think that's true for a lot of our games. When I was working on *Thief* the story we did was about somebody caught between two extremes of ideology: a pagan god-force versus the powers of modernisation, and they were both these extremes which would not accept any change, and you're stuck in the middle. I think, deep down, *Bioshock* is the same thing: it's about you being caught in between these two characters: Ryan, the founder of Rapture, and Fontaine, his business rival – and their extreme ideologies of how they view the world."

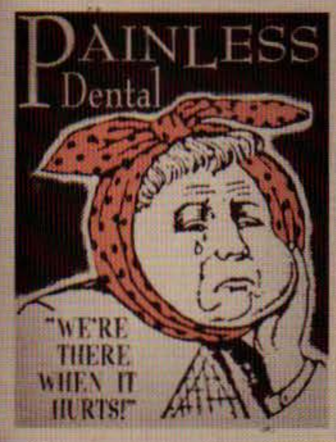
Bioshock kicks off long after Rapture's desire for perfection has turned to genetic engineering, with the city's own populace becoming the only remaining source of the rare genetic material which those in power need to survive – hence the harvesting of corpses by the Little Sisters. But Levine is hasty to point out that he's not really interested in making reactionary comments about science for the sake of it. "It's not about the dangers of genetic experimentation or the dangers of building a city



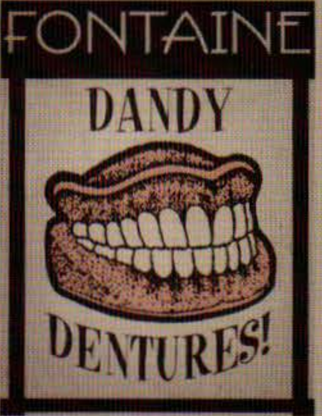




Advertisements and posters, with their breezy '50s stylings, create a powerful counterpoint to the grim reality of what Rapture has become. Like *Half-Life 2*, the city's history is written in the rubble and decay. Every corridor hints at a conflict, and the sense of entropy is overwhelming





















The iconography of diving bells has provided Irrational with some of the most striking enemies since *Killzone*'s amber-eyed Hellghast. Their ponderous movements through Rapture's almost Steampunk interiors seem likely to create a lasting impression. "The prom queen can be smart, but she's also got to be pretty," says Levine, crafting an unexpected metaphor to explain the game's appeal. "It's a very pretty game, and that gets people over that first hump of 'oh, I want to look at this', and then they see the gameplay, and that seals the deal

CHINESE AMERICAN FOODS

underwater, it's the dangers of having ideas that are fixed. That's what you see looking around the political situation of the world: what happens when you have ideologies that won't change. I think a lot of people feel caught up in the middle of these extreme ideologies. It's a very dangerous place to be, but a very familiar place."

Bioshock itself seems caught in a war between two ideologies, with tightly-directed, narrative-led games on one side and more open-ended, branching titles on the other. Irrational aims to incorporate elements of both – a compelling story delivered through emergent gameplay filled with choices. Avoiding the ever-raging argument of whether this is even possible, what's clear is that many developers aren't interested in trying. "There's always a reason why people make corridor shooters – it's better for them and not as good for the player, so I think the theme in *Bioshock* is: 'Hey, we're going to do the work here, we're going to take the responsibility on', because that's going to make it much more interesting."

Rapture is central to this agenda. "The way we're approaching this is we're building a huge city, and it has secrets that you won't uncover in the first game," explains Levine. "Most FPSes are one extended corridor, but these are very open-ended naturalistic spaces, much more like a traditional space, much more exploratory. Once you've uncovered an area, you can go back to it freely throughout the game, so it's very free exploring."

It's also up to Rapture to carry most of the storytelling duties. "It's so much easier if your environment can do your work for you. We're building this area right now which is sort of a museum that talks about the ideology of Rapture, it's sort of a propaganda area on why this ideology is so great. Meanwhile the action – the characters, the monsters, the plot – so obviously puts the lie to that ideology, what with the devastation you see around you. And it's not a cutscene, and it's not a direct narrative. The contrast between the ideology and the gameworld – the AI and the monsters shooting at you and the dead bodies and the explosions – they all work to illustrate that contrast. If you can engage the player, not tell him what you're trying to tell him but let him suss it out through game action, you're in much better shape. A lesson that somebody imparts upon themselves is much more powerful than a lesson you sit down and tell them.

"Our goal is to create a game where it's pretty much impossible for us as designers to know how the gamer's going to play it," explains Levine. "Generally that's going to allow the player to skew things and solve dilemmas in perhaps dozens of different really improvisational ways." The results, while hopefully creating a better game, make testing and balancing a nightmare. "The easiest thing to



MORAL MINEFIELD

Levine is adamant that "one of the reasons we're making this game where we're really making a huge effort to build a world that feels real, that has real characters, and is a real place where real things have happened, is so that it puts you in this place that's rather familiar." With the game providing a moral battleground as well as a literal one, Levine is determined to create a more organic modelling of morality than the 'light and dark' meters of *Fable* or *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "I think the problem is that if you need to tell players about a questionable moral choice through words or a meter, you've sort of missed the point. We've all done things in our lives that probably wasn't morally entirely up to snuff, and there's a primal feeling that happens when you do that." A good example of this approach is the Little Sisters, who provide an abundant source of Plasmids – so long as you can bring yourself to partake in child murder to get at them. As a game device it works entirely upon the player's emotional engagement with the world, and seems likely to create some heartbreaking encounters.



"IN BIOSHOCK WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE PLAYER'S POWERS ARE GOING TO BE – NONE"

test is the old-style Sierra game, where the player doesn't have any expression outside of exactly what the designer knows he's going to do. He knows he's going to get the string and attach it to the stick and that he's going to make the bow: it's not like there's any player skill here, he's just trying to figure out exactly what the designer intended. In a game like *Bioshock* we have no idea what the player's powers are going to be – none. We really have to allow a huge range of expression, and it's always much harder."

Environments aside, Bioshock explores freeform gameplay in a variety of ways. The first is emergent AI: it's an area that has already provided Levine with his fair share of surprises, particularly with the disturbing relationship building between the Big Daddies and the Little Sisters: "They care about each other: sometimes they bicker, one that kills the other mourns the other one. Big Daddy protects the Little Sister, Little Sister looks for protection. It's a very primal relationship. It's a very sick and distorted relationship because they're not really father and daughter, it's this creature protecting this little girl because the city needs the research that she's gathered, but the visual cues are so strong, and without a lot of words – she doesn't even speak – it's a very clear relationship. In a game that is a really deep



Screenshots do some justice to the seething unease that sets in when you sit down to play *Bioshock*, but they can't convey the excellence of the audio work. Unsurprisingly, from the team behind *System Shock 2*, every aspect of the sound – dialogue, music, and effects – aims to unsettle

THE MOD SQUAD

Many of *Bioshock's* choices come from the Plasmids, bolt-on power-ups that offer various new skills such as telekinesis, increased firepower and the ability to hack machines and gun turrets. Stemming directly from *System Shock 2's* cybernetic modules, the game's 'save anywhere' system coupled with the one-shot terminals which allow you to completely switch around your selected Plasmids should ensure that the player feels free to experiment with different approaches without having to stick with early – and perhaps unwise – selections. The abilities themselves may seem rather familiar, but the combinations and the potential for upgrading each skill by attaching more Plasmids may create memorable opportunities.





Many games start by overwhelming the player with gameplay elements. *Bioshock* may be the first to literally drop you in the middle of an ocean

AFFORDABLE ENDINGS

Funeral Home

HAVEN'T YOU ALREADY PAID

FPS, to have a relationship that is really meaningful is incredibly satisfying."

And the AI is there to be directly engaged with. "Through genetic modifications, you can trick Big Daddy into thinking you're a Little Sister and he'll protect you, and that's an interesting feeling, this big guy being misled into protecting you. At one point the Little Sister will think you're the Big Daddy, and she'll be looking to you to protect her. I mean, you haven't really had that experience in an FPS. It's not like telling you to protect a convoy: this little girl looks at you and you know she needs your protection."

Emergent AI also helps to bring the game's puzzles out of the realm of simple item manipulation. "In the world you have digital puzzles and analogue puzzles," suggests Levine. "Digital puzzles are the old classic 'put the blue key in the blue door' puzzles. There's only one way to do it. Then there are the analogue puzzles, which is what we're doing with *Bioshock*: 'Hey, there's a lot of monsters in this area,' or you need ammo, or you need to get this resource. That's a puzzle that emerges out of the game. They're much tougher to tell a story with, but as much of the world as we can get into the analogue space, where we don't know how the player's going to do it, the better."

And then there are the Plasmids, which will be familiar to anyone who's juggled cybernetic modules in *System Shock 2*, or Biomod canisters in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Adam, the genetic material harvested by the Little Sisters, can be used to provide a variety of upgrades to your weapons or abilities. "You have all these powers in your collection, and when you get to these stations you can choose to load-out a sub-section of those. There's real choices for the player there. As the game goes on you can equip more and more." And you're not stuck with your choices: you can reload a different set at the next station. "If you want to make changes, there's lots of opportunities. It's really about: 'How do I want to be for the next sequence?'"

Bioshock exudes confidence, from the brass-plated character design to its cockily off-beat setting. Yet it's hard not to see lurking beneath it all the tentacles of an ambition that has already dragged other titles down into the depths. One of *Half-Life 2's* greatest achievements was the scarlet thread that tugged you ever forwards through the corridors and the digital puzzles. Without that channelling, the risk is that these larger locations will become meaningless spaces where the only sign of an overarching narrative is that you're held back from progressing until you've met some arbitrary criteria. Distant cousin *Invisible War* may turn out to be an apt comparison. For all its innovation, skill development, and emergent situations, the game felt fudged and fuzzy, a mess of confusing plots, where every choice seemed only to highlight the opportunities you were sacrificing. Ion Storm's game never quite trusted its players enough to make their own mistakes: those various paths were actually mirages created by a single, linear narrative. However, if *Bioshock* can focus on creating an experience that manages to incorporate the best elements of divergence without losing overall coherency, all the while providing the player with meaningful freedom, it could live up to its enormous potential.

That Special GIFT!

"THE WACKIER, MORE INTERESTING IDEAS CAN ACTUALLY HAPPEN"



Character design, particularly with the pairing of the Big Daddies and the Little Sisters, is an obvious strong point. The absolute lack of human reference points in Big Daddy's appearance jars eerily with his tender, protective treatment of the Little Sisters. Levine refers to him as a 'creature'

Whatever the outcome, *Bioshock's* effect on Irrational's pocket kingdom has been immense. Nearing 80 people, the development team is its largest so far, and while it's been an administrative headache, it's created novel experiences for Levine. "I think the challenge with Irrational is in saying, now we have time, let's take chances here. It's not profligate spending, it's people who are used to working on a budget saying: 'Ok, now we can actually do that.' We come from a place of real efficient development; it's always easier to fit into a larger pair of pants when you're lean and mean, than to try and





DIFFERENT BUT SIMILAR

Irrational's games seem remarkably varied, from the colourful excess of titles such as *Freedom Force* to the pseudo-sports immediacy of *Tribes: Vengeance*. It's the firm's first game, however, 1999's *System Shock 2*, which provides most of the reference points for its latest title. As a spiritual successor, *Bioshock* has no direct links to either story, setting or characters, but attempts to build on the game's strong sense of isolated dread, as well as exploring the same emergent gameplay and RPG-style upgrades. Given *SS2*'s reputation and fanbase, it's a hard act to follow, but *Bioshock* seems original and imaginative enough to stand by itself.

squeeze into a really tight pair of pants when you've been at the buffet too long. We've been lean and mean for a very long time. We've never had enough time before. We've never had time to go back and say: is this really what we wanted it to be? Is this really interesting enough and fun enough?" *Bioshock* has given them the time. "We did a prototype over a year ago, and I took it to New York to show it, and I wasn't happy with it and I said: 'I hate the look of this game and we're going to start over,' and we did. We've thrown out more with *Bioshock* than actually went into many of the games we've made before."

Despite the extra work involved, Levine is also enthusiastic about the next-generation technologies on offer. "Where it used to be: well, we really can't do that, on this generation I really have not had that experience yet. It's feasible to do what you want. And what that means is that the wackier, more interesting ideas can actually happen."

It may be a huge task in every sense, but it has not dimmed Levine's faith in the power of games to provide new experiences. "When you start a game, you can do anything, and it's amazing how often we choose to do the same thing over and over again. When I was working in Hollywood, they used to tell me to do the same but different: something people can identify with, but sort of a new take on that. I think the cool thing about *Bioshock* is that people can look at it and recognise the world. The architecture's familiar, the advertising is familiar, the clothing is familiar, but it's not WWII or somewhere they've been before. It's a place people haven't seen before but won't be completely alienated by."

And with that, we're back where we started – the experiences games could provide that they so rarely do. For *Bioshock*, it's still by no means certain that Levine and his team won't go down with the ship, but the energy, enthusiasm and rampant ambition ingrained in the development suggests that this really may be the game that dives deeper than many others could, in order to wrench from the ocean floor that elusive, dripping trophy.



Adding to Rapture's gruesome atmosphere is the knowledge that all its denizens were once the elite – hand-picked geniuses to populate a doomed utopia







Concept paintings show the scope of *Bioshock*'s visual ambition. They're benchmarks the game engine shows every sign of being able to attain




CITY HUNTER



Dave Jones led the invention of GTA and the genre it spawned. Is his new game, Crackdown, ready to lead its reinvention?

The *GTA* clones have finally come of age. So much so that such a pigeonholing is becoming problematic. No game can ever truly achieve the 'living, breathing city' cliché, but plenty are beginning to realise the kind of principles and complexity that such a sensationalist description originally set out to convey. *Destroy All Humans*, *Mercenaries*, *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* – all have confidently crafted worlds, each with their own spin on the cars 'n' guns free-for-all that helped unlock the potential of *GTA*'s 3D adventures. More recently, titles like *Scarface* and *Just Cause* continue that trend, advancing the tech and thinking more and more for themselves in a progression that's not so much about pushing *GTA: San Andreas*' envelope as returning it to sender.

TITLE: **CRACKDOWN**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIO**
DEVELOPER: **REAL TIME WORLDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2006**





As is typical, your energy and body armour will recharge over time, with the latter needing to be refilled before the former will top up. It's not yet clear how – if at all – health upgrades will fit into the five-strong mix of upgradeable skills on offer

But there's a problem. These game worlds have been completed and fully furnished, primed for exploration via a versatile range of vehicles, populated with wind-up life and made home to some solid and reactive combat. They give good screenshot, boast a fat armoury and garage (and, often, wardrobe), are notably bigger than *San Andreas* and their names sit above many a convenient *GTA*-meets-proper-noun magazine cover line. But there's still something missing. *Spider-Man 2* and, even more severely, *Ultimate Spider-Man*, started promisingly but faded out all too quickly under the weight of too many identikit filler tasks. *Destroy All Humans*, too, conjured up tangible environments and vividly brutal alien-invasion weaponry, but suffered from some tedious and conservative objectives. *Saints Row* veers dangerously close to being another case study in how having a complex world is just the very first step of many towards imaginative mission design.

All those hard-won square miles of virtual real estate are in danger of becoming dead space, bulked out with the kind of to-and-fro goals that have made glorified pizza delivery as popular a videogame vocation as being a bullet-dodging action hero. Where's the creative application of these engrossing ecosystems that have taken however many thousands of man-hours to realise? It's a worrying trend – of escalating technology threatening to suppress gameplay – albeit one that'll likely recede as the genre marches on.



Staged in the near future within the fictional Pacific City, you play the good guy whose goal is to stamp out crime, not to own the world

So, what happens next? *Crackdown* may have the answer, but interestingly it's down to what it *hasn't* added, rather than what it has. There is no story, instantly allowing it to break free from the empire-building conceit of free-roaming games. But there is a set up: Staged in the near future within the fictional Pacific City, you play the good guy whose goal is, simply, to stamp out crime; not to own the world, but take it back for the people. Playing as an Agent employed by the Agency – the justice-enforcing organisation whose HQ is a near-mile-high skyscraper located in the centre of the game world – your goal is to take out 21 gang lords that have set up camp throughout the city. And that produces the second omission, radical and immediately ripe with revolutionary possibilities: there is no mission chain. The gang lords are to be tackled in whichever order is preferred, and every single one of those 21 outlaws exists in the gameworld from the moment you first step out onto Pacific City's vibrant turf. Nothing is off-limits, nothing waiting to be triggered by completing a story requirement: every goon and thug relevant to your quest is in place from the moment you begin. But there's still a hierarchy in place – Pacific City consists of three islands, each with its own gang and each with its own kingpin, supported by six deputies that make up the 21 objectives. The kingpins have some supreme defences, tucking themselves away behind layer upon layer of well-guarded barricades and room after room of grenade-happy foot soldiers. But there's a way to wear them down without a repeated series of suicidal head-on strikes.

Each deputy provides some kind of buff for their respective kingpin. The 'first' island – at least, the one offering the easiest gangland takedowns – is roamed by the Los Muerto, a street gang whose logo wouldn't look out of place spray-painted across the side of a San Andreas building. One Los

TWO-GETHER

Crackdown's world isn't, thankfully, of record-breaking size, which may very well account for its capacity to host a feature that'll see the game appearing on the wishlists of an oft-overlooked category of gamer – co-op play. Two people can meet at a point of the host's choosing within Pacific City, and then either party can go their own way, best-laid plans can be executed or fudged, or an impromptu deathmatch indulged in. As a concession to co-operation, two bulky Agents can, funnily, squeeze into a car together or, even better, one can roof surf while the other drives. Live users on the lookout for a partner can leave a number of requests when advertising online: Quiet or talkative players, for example, or a jobber to fit a specific role, such as sniping.



Crackdown's action has a good enough memory to allow the placement of a handful of sticky satchel charges around an area, to be detonated from a safe distance. There's no need to worry about the trajectory of grenades, either – whatever the reticule hovers over is where the explosive will land

Muerto deputy is a 'dirty hooker' whose nightclub HQ is a front for her role as a seductive recruitment officer, luring more and more men into the gang's fold. Take her down, and the kingpin's army of bodyguards won't be as crowded, and will repopulate more slowly if the player takes a number of them out during a failed assault. A lighthouse is home to a gun-runner, whose role is to keep the family topped up with powerful munitions; without him, Los Muerto's minions can't rain down as much bullet hell on anyone approaching the kingpin's lair. Similarly, another deputy takes care of vehicles through a garage. Another deputy, hiding out in a sports complex, acts as a gang trainer, keeping the hoods in peak physical condition. Taking each one down is a limb shot, incapacitating the kingpin for that final head-honcho shot needed to wipe the gang out and return order to each island, an endeavour that's reflected in the grungy, litter-scattered streets of Pacific City becoming literally cleaner as the mob gets mopped up. The second and third islands are home to The Volk – a militaristic crew with access to APCs, and a steady stream of new recruits via the immigration racket that's taking place in the dock area – and the Shai Gen, a technologically advanced faction that represents the toughest challenge of the three.

That hierarchy is in place for another fundamental reason. Throughout the game, the player's character – the Agent – is improving through direct experience. Five categories of skill can be upgraded, with the player choosing when and what to specialise in: agility, strength, explosives, guns and driving. Each travels through five stages of upgrade and, with the exception of agility, is evolved by neutralising criminals in the manner each suggests. Agility is governed by collecting green icons scattered throughout the game world – 600 in all – each placed in such a way as to test your ability to climb and clamber over rooftops. As it improves, agility becomes the key to enormous, Hulk-style leaps and sprints, allowing the player to make maximum use of *Crackdown*'s significant verticality. Every building can, somehow, be scaled – each structure offering some kind of simple platforming puzzle, linking leaps from ground level to rooftop by clinging on to window frames and billboards as interim grips.

Increased strength means that cars can be booted around, hoisted overhead and flung over a superhuman distance. Combined with the excellent target lock-on, it allows for some remote control bludgeoning, or for a tanker to get tossed into a barricade and detonated with a swift follow-up grenade. The explosives skill is, of course, straightforward, but the boom-per-bomb resulting from each grenade or rocket launched into the fray escalates into a mighty mushroom cloud of inarguable destruction. Indeed, *Crackdown*'s approach to explosions, that prop of choice for modern-day screenshot mock-ups, is an energetic one, where vehicles splatter into tumbles of useable junk – tyres and doors can be picked up and thrown or grasped as a shield. Secondary detonations join in on the spot, contributing to a pleasingly wide blast wave that engulfs all nearby vehicles, a Darwin Award waiting to happen for those players we get too caught up in some careless chaos. It's a liberating aspect of *Crackdown*'s engine, that its action has as



The Agency Tower is *Crackdown*'s centrepiece, and one of the tallest buildings in the game. Scaling it is one of the game's optional challenges, and reaching its rooftop needle requires nailbiting leaps. If all goes awry, a swimming pool at the base can be a lifesaver



E-SUPPORTS

Crackdown has successfully tapped into both the stat-sheet obsession of *GTA* and the player-manufactured minigames that blossomed in Rockstar North's worlds – largest explosion chain, most arm shots in a minute, highest vantage point reached, etc – and brought them to life, via Achievements and Leaderboards. Whenever the player is heading towards one of *Crackdown*'s many high-score Achievements (and there may be more than the maximum of 50, pending Microsoft's action to change the cap), an on-screen prompt reminds the player of what they're close to attaining. Once such an Achievement is unlocked, it opens up a Leaderboard, with realtime in-game updates to let you know if anyone on your Friends list has trumped your score, a jibe that also gets scrolled across a number of billboards throughout the city.

much of a draw distance as the visuals themselves, allowing for tactics to be played out long-range without being limited to a locality of spawning enemies and nearby vehicle jams.

Using cars to roadkill criminals enhances the driving skill, but even this needs further explanation. While any vehicle can be commandeered, the Agency can provide three special types for getting the job done – a sports car, SUV and truck. As the player's skill evolves, so does their Agency vehicle as they jump into it, morphing from the standard issue model into something sleeker and more potent, with the sports car transforming into an elongated, low-slung Batmobile lookalike. Each of the three vehicles has its use: Sports cars become high-speed shovels, flicking cars out of the way as they power through traffic, with the ultimate addition of a front-mounted machine gun. SUVs provide all-terrain suspension, and can be preloaded to execute some *Craxy Taxi* jumps – plus backflips via aftertouch. And trucks swat vehicles out of their path with all the viciousness of *GTA III*'s tank, causing them to explode, and can crash through the security gates that sometimes guard the back entrance to a criminal's hideout.

And finally: gunplay. Much like *Scarface* (see p35), once you've locked on to an enemy, there's a choice of hitzones, directed with the right stick. Unlike Tony Montana's testicle obsession, *Crackdown*'s anatomical sniping is slickly clinical, even offering an icon next to your target's energy bar highlighting just where your next bullet is headed. But, brilliantly, it doesn't stop there – the same kind of system applies to vehicles, finally opening up the rather hopeless shoot-the-petrol-cap mechanic introduced with *San Andreas*. When locked on to a car or truck, holding the right stick down will see its tyres taken out in a wink, while holding up gives you a precise shot at the petrol cap – provided you're on the correct side – meaning that a car whizzing past at highway speeds can still be brought to a screaming action-movie halt without any need for precision aiming. It's a good summation of *Crackdown*'s attitude towards firearms – your job is decide what gets shot and how it gets shot, with the game taking care of the finer details. Detached as it may sound, it's an indication of just how breakneck and snappy the combat is intended to be, and just how many bodies the criminal world is willing to send your way. Ditto the streets themselves, where the number of pedestrians has had to be pulled back from the game engine's full capability, simply because the droves of bystanders were too thick to allow the player to act without causing excessive collateral damage, a restriction that needs to be observed in the name of law enforcement (see 'Good tidings').

An Agent with fully-fledged agility gets a superhero's key to the city, vaulting and sprinting with the confidence, if not the acrobatic grace, of a free runner. Full agility points also allow the player to survive some tremendously high falls, naturally



Pacific City's visuals are happy to embrace pink, purple and a number of other garish colours that action games usually have a phobia of. Certain districts can become shrouded in some powerful, graduated hues as they head towards dusk or dawn

The hyper-aggressive waves of enemies present in the code that we played give rise to a previewer's problem, however. While *Crackdown* appears to be feature complete, its social dysfunction is currently set to 'chaos', resulting in a relentless barrage of gang members, enforcers (Agency-employed peacekeepers that will attack a rogue Agent, as well as criminals) and hit squads employed by gangs to take down the supercop nuisance the player represents. Even cruising the streets results in the tyres being shot out by overzealous gang members in next to no time. As such, it's impossible to gauge just how the crucial difficulty balancing is going to turn out. While it's a game that has already proven its capability to think both big and small (see 'E-supports'), the matter of everything in between – the flexibility to exploit its skill system during those seamless boss fight set-pieces – is still an unknown quality. While every one of the 21 confrontations has been built with an eye for multiple approaches from all kinds of angles – staged in and around structures that present a climbing frame as well as a gauntlet of gun battles – there's no way to judge just how fluidly the player can improvise a way through.

Certainly, Real Time Worlds has crafted a plausible, stylish and pretty city, one as deserving of that nonsensical living-breathing tag as any. And it has been brought to life with technical clout as well as cunning art direction; those deep-creased, hand-drawn comic-book looks serve a very wise purpose, offering the clarity of cel-shaded rendering but coated with the kind of detail that such cartoon worlds often lack. It's been filled with guns, cars and people, but has also gone on to give the player something worthy to do, not to mention its aim of realising some of the enormous untapped potential of co-op gaming (see 'Two-gether'). And its decision to spare players a hoary plot, instead simply requiring an action-intensive pursuit of justice, is a move that helps put the sandbox back into the playground. But it's now reached a higher-level problem, of writing a recipe to do justice to its industrious ingredients, an act of fine-tuning that's likely just as dizzying for *Crackdown*'s designers as it is for the player first stepping out into Pacific City.

If the freeform genre embodied by the 3D *GTA* games is truly coming of age, then *Crackdown* is one of its most promising graduates. And, just as hopefully, it won't be swept aside by the 2006 Christmas bunfight as two new consoles burst onto the market along with Microsoft's prime 360 concern, *Gears Of War*, nor end up forgotten as the *Halo 3* and *GTA IV* hype-drives thrum into action early next year. Such an oversight would, if *Crackdown*'s potential is fulfilled, be as demeaning and depressing as any number of glorified pizza delivery missions.



If the freeform genre embodied by the 3D GTA games is coming of age, then Crackdown is one of its most promising graduates





GOOD TIDINGS

Like *Scarface*, *Crackdown* has a morality that goes beyond simply punishing the player for the careless killing of innocents with an aggressive police presence. But unlike *Scarface*'s self-imposed blanket ban on needless violence, *Crackdown* lets you take down whoever you want, but continuing to slaughter pedestrians leads to the Agency branding you a 'malfunctioning' agent. Peacekeeping units will be sent to take you down, while the upgrade system will be stalled as punishment for going rogue. It's a morality that rewards skilful and considerate play, asking the player to relocate their scraps to an area with a lower chance of civilian fallout, while accrued heat through criminal behaviour can be dissipated by laying low away from the streets.



Crackdown features a typically broad range of soundbites and ambient city chatter. An excellent, if ultimately wearying, touch are the chicken noises gangsters make if the player leaves a fight


PO11

HOW DOES THEIR GARDEN GROW?

As Microsoft sets its eye on an elusive market, Viva Piñata shows us how to break it open



We're looking for cygnets at Rare HQ, last seen somewhere beyond the football pitch – down the road from the guardhouse and across the lake, in the space reserved for an immanent fête. That we're finding none is no surprise – they could be sleeping, hiding or foraging, as wildlife does. What is surprising is that **Lee Schuneman**, an 11-year veteran of the manor-house-reborn and *Viva Piñata's* executive producer, isn't sure he's ever explored this far into the grounds before.

Such is the sense of relief out here, of traumas such as magazine deadlines and blocked toilets being whisked away on the breeze, that it's easy to overlook facts. Rare's loyal tribe of employees, holding steady at 200-strong, may be amid something approaching rural paradise, but still works every last industry hour. This is as much an excursion for our hosts as it is for us, and once inside the talk snaps instinctively back to Microsoft, TV networks and code, the eyes to monitors and consoles. Sensing the shame of wasting that outside world on these people trapped within, we joke that a camera obscura might be worth the investment. But again, we've overlooked facts. With *Viva Piñata*, it's building one of those already.

Announced back in March, this trading and gardening game brings a flood of coniferous colour into Rare's codeshop barn,

TITLE: **VIVA PIÑATA**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**

When it rains on Piñata Island, the colour runs out of the whole environment, save an illuminated patch beneath your cursor. A similar effect occurs at night, the island recast in nocturnal blue that never overdarkens the screen







gaining entry through every workstation, mixing desk and inked design. An unapologetic kids' title with evident crossover potential, its style is its substance, as farmed from both the studio's Warwickshire surroundings and the heritage of games such as *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. Immediate comparisons have been made to *Harvest Moon*, *Animal Crossing*, *The Sims* and of course *Pokémon*. Yet somehow, despite the 26-episode TV series in production at America's 4kids network (see 'Suspended animation') it's unquestionably the company's most personal title since its Ultimate days.

"We always wanted it to be a game where you could just watch the animals going about their daily business," explains lead designer **Gregg Mayles**, "like looking out of a real window into your garden. They won't do the same thing when they get up every morning, or when they go from place to place – that was a big aim. We wanted it to be like an aquarium."

An aquarium with a post office, to be exact. Born as a mobile phone game in 2002 before jumping once to Xbox and then again to Xbox 360, *Piñata*'s journey has been one of two constants – enclosed spaces and mailboxes. "We started on the CE-based phones," recalls lead software engineer **Will Bryan**. "Making use of what Microsoft had in terms of networking. The whole idea was based on trading, which lent itself to the platform. Then Microsoft came in and said: 'Do you want to have a look at Xbox Live, being made available in a couple of months?' That was more our traditional platform."

"When the project first started, it was all kinda cute," says **Ed Bryan**, *Piñata*'s lead artist. "The kind of cute animals you'd expect, just wandering around. Quite Japanesey, I suppose." Concept artist **Ryan Stevenson** agrees: "It was a slow process. If we could drag out the original artwork that was done, you'd see that it's very different to what we ended up with. We needed some way of making this world cohesive, so looking around at different cultures we hit upon the piñatas. Then everything just fell into place."

"There was that period when we were looking at beanies – stuff like that," adds Ed Bryan, "and the very soft, velvety fabrics. Then we came to this. For the original paper fur effect, Ryan actually hand-drew the textures and they're still in the game now. And we were still on Xbox, so we'd be getting: 'Oh, you want paper? Well, we can't do that.'

"I think that once everyone knew that 360 was coming, and we'd already had this leap from mobile phone, we knew Xbox was getting towards the end of its life. So it was like: 'Wait a minute. If we hold out, we can do so much more. Or we can be a very late Xbox title.'" Stevenson adds: "It's almost that the game needed it to justify its visual style." "True," agrees Ed Bryan. "There's really nothing now that's keeping us from doing what we want to do."

As *Viva Piñata* opens with a *Kameo*-esque orchestral fanfare, recently recorded by the Prague Philharmonic, on a cracked and barren bowl fenced in by blurry distant mountains, what Rare wants to do becomes crystal clear. A tutorial character, garbed in a hotchpotch of South American styles, hands over the first of three tools – a weathered shovel still strong enough to batter fertility from the ground or whack some attention out of the local wildlife. And all it takes is a streak of newly-grown grass (crêpe paper, of course) for the first such creature to appear. Lowly and inquisitive, the common garden Whirlm presses towards the boundaries of the patch, outlined by a rectangle that player progress will expand.

Like all wild piñatas he's a shadowy character, drawn only in shades of grey and initially aloof. But once his requirements have been met – being a tutorial character, they seem to be nothing more than replacing a baked plate of soil with some grass – his colour returns and his tenancy begins. Little of what follows, once you achieve your first milestone of growing a carrot, should come as much surprise: you're given seeds, tools and a watering can to help the garden grow, objectives to help concentrate your efforts, chocolate coins to fund later trips to the store, and as an ultimate reward, piñatas. The game will offer 60 unique species to discover and acquire, and the team estimates that only half will emerge during a first completed evolution of the garden and its creatures.

Just as Conker's tail wowed players of *Live And Reloaded*, *Viva Piñata*'s rustling paper looks great on 360. "We couldn't do the fur [for all animals in the garden] on Xbox," notes Stevenson. "There was even talk of you picking a favourite animal and having it exclusively applied"



"If you decide one day you want to give your garden over to ponies there'll be enough to keep you entertained"

"We always knew it would be the case," says producer **Justin Cook**, "that if you come up with a list of animals, people are just going to try and get to the end as soon as possible. So we made it so that if you liked a certain type of piñata, you could specialise in it. They each have a handful of secrets such as different versions and things you can do. So you can stop at a particular level and just enjoy that experience of keeping ponies, or rabbits. We're not going to stop people that just want to plough through, but if you decide one day that you want to give your whole garden over to ponies, then they'll be enough you can do with the ponies to keep you entertained." Predictably, there's a chuckle.

Sitting at the heart of *Viva Piñata*, this organic design streak is impossible to dislike. The levelling system goes sideways (the nurturing of your animals) as well as upwards



Available via D-pad, the three tools neatly handle the work demanded by this initially barren plot of land. Such is the diversity of AI that striking a resident piñata with the shovel can provoke either a fight or flight



CANDY STORES

Aware of the need to add some spice to its garden's life, *Viva Piñata*'s stores serve a variety of player needs and desires. Costolot's general store is a trading post for farm produce, buying and selling seeds, vegetables and garden props. Willy Builder (that's what they told us) gives your Piñatas homes, Miss Petula's Paper Pets stocks domestic animals unobtainable in the wild such as cats and dogs, and Bart's Exchange will, for a price, tinker your items into something new. Ivor Bargain is a beggar/trader with an eye for chocolate coins, while Arfur's Inn is the place to hire Garden Helpers. Separated into Weedling, Sprinkling, Watchling, Gatherling and Diggerling, the helper tasks cover the micromanagement chores discovered by Rare during development. Finally, Fanny Franker's post office provides a hub for the game's all-important online market, while Gretchen Fetchem can be hired to track down strays.





While the piñatas bop an extra layer on to their family tree, the jukebox puts out a theme tailored for the species. Included are nods to Mars Attacks, Duran Duran, The Benny Hill Show and '60s psychedelia

(the growth of your garden and its plants), leaving you to enjoy the game at a pace of your choosing. Accessed via a petal menu, each animal has its own journal that covers personal details such as name (you can choose) and birth date, but more importantly the individual requirements for that species' evolution. Potentially hindering that process is a world in which almost nothing occurs arbitrarily. Even the ageing of piñatas can been stalled if they're kept happy enough.

Perhaps the most specific instance of cause-and-effect you'll see in the garden is human intervention, triggered by the animals' behavioural states. Masked reaper Dastardos treks down from his house (a tree trunk) to gleefully finish off ailing piñatas, while in direct competition Dr Patchingo arrives in his ambulance – a miniaturised kart wrenched right out of pre-school TV. To answer the inevitable question: Yes, the piñatas can be smashed, and their plastic-wrapped innards strewn across the floor. But no, they never die. When a piñata expires, it instead loses its identity (arguably a more harrowing concept than a straight bludgeoning) and materialises back in the monochrome wild.

Trust us, you probably won't want that to happen. To the ladies (a straw poll has proved) they'll be adorable, to the kids fascinating and to the men either entertaining or, admittedly, insufferable (it's really too close to call, and probably genetic). Regardless, the piñata themselves are a specific kind of return to form for Rare – quintessential in their human qualities and blessed with a reinvigorated in-house charm. Interestingly, one of the few points of discord between Rare and its US collaborators has been nomenclature, with each side learning a thing or two about the other's famous sweets. You can say this of the Bunnycombs, Zumbugs (zebras), Syrupents, Sparrowmints, Twingersnaps (two-headed snakes) and assorted others: they're Cute.

"The character models themselves are still fairly cheap," notes Ed Bryan, "but to do the fur is like 16 extra shells of geometry. When you've got 2,000-triangle animals, multiplying that by 16 is a lot. But there's nothing we've really hit where we can't do it." Software engineer **Brent Poynton** adds: "The nature of the game is that people gain piñata and then want more of them, so that's where the challenge has been in terms of power, and where 360's been especially helpful."

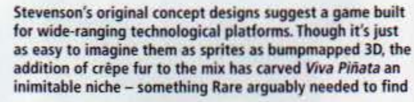
Does the enclosed environment help? Will Bryan thinks not: "The negative side of it is that whereas in a corridor-based game you can only see the corridor, here you can pull back to the far side of the garden and see everything, so that means drawing everything. You can't miss anything out."

"But then the designers have it so that certain animals don't like each other," adds

"The nature of the game is that people gain piñata and then want more of them"







Stevenson's original concept designs suggest a game built for wide-ranging technological platforms. Though it's just as easy to imagine them as sprites as bumpmapped 3D, the addition of crêpe fur to the mix has carved *Viva Piñata* an inimitable niche – something Rare arguably needed to find

SUGABABES

Because it takes just two to tango, *Viva Piñata* lets you accept no more of each species from the wild. Further growth requires what the politically correct might call "dynamic population". Each of the different animals has its own romance dance, initiated by bring them together with the cursor under a specific set of circumstances. An arcade minigame decides the result, and success sees a local stork piñata bring down an egg from its mountain nest. Every dance has a different theme tune which, thanks to Kirkhope's integration of every instrument from violin to theremin, admirably bolsters the characterisation of the piñatas involved. As the species population rises, the time limits for the romance minigames become stricter. It's hoped that dual controller support will encourage on-the-spot assistance from older brothers and parents, though we struggle to see the difficulty in just handing one of them back and forth.





"The game's nature means that once you've put a load of things in your garden, you have to be able to access it all at once," says Will Bryan when asked about 360's lack of a guaranteed hard drive. "It all has to fit in memory, so caching from hard disk isn't really going to benefit us"







Stevenson, "so you don't necessarily have this problem of all the animals being in the garden all at the same time."

With just the one garden environment (more were considered) and an unseen use of Live functionality, it's the game's emergent, behavioural qualities that will, overall, bring it either sun or rain. At present, the forecast is good. The reactions of the piñata, plants and human characters to each other and natural events suggest a convincing ecosystem with a food chain (no fighting, just characterised projectile battles) and randomised, though partially regulated weather cycles. If there's a fight, then nearby piñata might gather round for some cheap thrills. If there's a death (breakage, reincarnation or however you choose to describe it) then stray sweets will likely be gobbled up. If there's too little space for an animal to roam, then it becomes ill, lowering its value.



Beyond the coins that fund the garden, the houses that keep the animals safe and virile (see 'Sugababes'), the purchasable fashion accessories and human helper contracts, that price on a piñata's head is the game's only currency. Key to its Xbox Live modes, it builds from the moment you assign your creature a tag – a discreet, customisable brand that protrudes plush-like from their fur. The way Rare sees it, if people want to fight tooth and nail over Gamerpoints, then the same bug will bite them here, and it's no surprise to learn that a wide spectrum of Achievements will feature. Pack any five items together at the game's post office – piñatas included – and the bundle can be shipped electronically to a Live-enabled friend. Or for a less expensive brag, there'll be online minigames for direct competition between your pets.

The most promising online mode involves spectator support, through which you can invite friends to visit, even help tend your garden once you grant them the privilege. Novel as it sounds, we'll admit that it isn't the mode we envisaged back in March. The idea

"We tried to make it so you never see it load," says Will Bryan. "So when you go inside a house, the screen'll wipe quickly and you'll be there. But we've made sure that as much stays in memory as possible, so you'll go straight back afterwards"





of a persistent online allotment in which players' gardens sat adjoined, poaching piñata and spying over the fence, seemed a no-brain complement to the design. But perhaps that blue-sky suggestion was a bit brainless in itself, its logistics spiralling when you actually see the game in motion. Maybe it'll arrive in a future sequel, we're informed, sometime after the downloadable content period has ended.

When asked if Microsoft has imposed some kind of downloadble content schedule, Schuneman laughs: "They'll try, but we have to make the right decision for the game. We don't want to end up just putting crap out." The administrative experience of leaving team members behind to work on *Kameo* and *PDZ* is said to have stung Rare, though not in a manner that would discourage further efforts. Quite the contrary, in fact. "The thing from my point of view," explains Will Bryan, "is that we've made such an effort to develop the game in the first place that to not do a little more afterwards would feel like you were cheating yourself. The plan with DLC isn't to hold stuff back but to make sure that new stuff integrates fully. It's not like we're adding extra levels – the same garden has to work with whatever we put in."

The assumption, of course, being that people will want those additions in the first place. By the team's own admission, no one hit the refresh button more times during *Piñata*'s post-announcement days than Rare itself, and no one's better acquainted with the tides of online opinion, as incidental as they might be. "The thing I've noticed is that you can see the different attitudes on the forums," says Ed Bryan. "Someone would bash the game, and someone else would come on and say: 'You're wrong: I've got kids and they'll love this.' That's an interesting thing to see."

"Someone would bash the game and someone else would say: 'I've got kids and they'll love this'"

Is the team worried that the game might become a proxy battle between Microsoft and the Rare-acquainted, *Pokémon*-owning Nintendo? "I don't think that's the misunderstanding," says Stevenson. "It's more people

Clockwise from below: Rare's purpose-built workshop, software engineer Brent Poynton, senior musician Grant Kirkhope, and lead software engineer Will Bryan. Opposite: concept artist Ryan Stevenson and lead artist Ed Bryan. Not pictured are camera-shy lead designer Gregg Mayles, designer Justin Cook, production director Simon Farmer, and *Viva Piñata*'s executive producer Lee Schuneman





The garden contains enough natural and manmade agents to help the premise blossom, but Rare's considering both DLC and unspecified support for Live Anywhere, Microsoft's cross-platform extension of gamer profiles beyond 360





misunderstanding the game itself. There are a lot of jaded people on forums, yet all they seem to ask for much of the time is *Halo 5* or whatever. If that's your attitude, well this game's not for you. There are other games out there."

Which perhaps brings us to the crux of the matter concerning *Viva Piñata*: who *is* it being made for? Microsoft will readily testify to its user base occupying the 20-30 age bracket, and despite the pressing need for a presence in the kids market, it's hardly the strongest aspect of the company's brand. Is Rare at all anxious over this apparent discord? "You have to start somewhere," says Cook, "especially if you want to introduce a new audience. We set out to make a game that would appeal to people who aren't necessarily buying 360s at the moment. And we're finding a lot of people who seem dead chuffed to find something that isn't a movie licence. We wanted something of real quality, and that can be applicable to everyone."





SUSPENDED ANIMATION

If there's a twist to the story behind the Viva Piñata TV show (above), it's that it's made by the same company that brought Pokémon to western screens. That said, it could also be that this isn't the first time Rare has worked with US network 4kids, having previously done so at, ironically, Nintendo's bequest. But then again, it could also be that no one at Rare could tell you precisely how it came about in the first place.

"Now that's a hard one," laughs Cook. "I think we just heard from Microsoft one day," recalls Mayles. "They said: 'Oh, by the way, you're doing a TV show now.' I'd never heard of 4kids before, and never realised that they were quite so big." "We'd actually dealt with them before," adds Farmer, "but never to anything like this degree. Nintendo had a deal going with them from before the Microsoft acquisition, and they'd optioned a few things such as *Perfect Dark*. So we had spoken with them, but only at the top tier, and never at the creative level."

Less of a surprise to those familiar with Pokémon, specifically with lead character Pikachu, will be the absence of the show's characters from the game. Instead, only their species will be represented. Following initial confusion over precisely where the characters – if not the concept – originated, it's now clear that *Viva Piñata* is Rare's creation all the way up to the point at which its animals speak – something else that only TV audiences will experience.

"When the decision was made that we were going to do a cartoon show," says Mayles, "we conducted a survey round the studio to see what everyone's favourite characters were. Really, it was as simple as that. So we had those four characters then that we passed on to 4kids."

"When that all kicked off," recalls Ed Bryan, "the bulk of the assets, for the animals at least, were already in the game. So we'd only give them the models. They had some animations, but only for reference: for the animals, trees, plants, all of that. Then the production house [Canada's Bardel Entertainment] basically rebuilt them and made them talk, etc – all the stuff that we never knew would be needed. If ever we wanted to use them, we just asked them to be sent back over. That side of it's worked brilliantly." For a spot of evidence, look up the game's boxart which features not Rare's, but 4kids' models. "We get a lot of concepts back from them," adds Stevenson, "like when they want to make changes. It's a very back-and-forth, very organic process."

The show (we see an episode in which Hudson the Horstacio encounters stiff competition in a Piñata Island grooming event) is a polished piece of work that never tries to straddle both child and adult audiences. It is, as its network's name implies, for little people only. It pulls many of Pokémon's clever tricks (though don't expect the one involving 600 epileptic seizures), most notably tipping off viewers as to secrets hidden in the game. Everyone knows, we're told, that over-feeding a Horstacio with sweets turns it into a Zumbug. The morality of this one episode is clouded at best, though we can't say whether it's an ongoing series trait. To help Hudson to victory, friends such as Fergy Fudgehog and Frankin Fizzybear trick his opponent into scoffing the festival's sweet garden, disqualifying him from the contest. Granted, though, Hudson endures a gruelling montage sequence first.

At Piñata Island's centre is a towering factory that also occupies the heart of the game's premise: it builds the piñata for breeding purposes before ultimately dispatching them to children's parties in the real world. When we ask if there are ever problems with synchronising the game and show, this emerges as the prime example. "That was probably the one that was most drawn out," explains Ed Bryan, "partly, I guess, because we were yet to actually do that one ourselves. With the animals it was easy: 'These are done and this is how they are.'" "There's also the fact," adds Stevenson, "that while the cartoon's over on one side of the island, our garden's on the other."

Does Rare ever find itself having to rein in 4kids? "I don't think it's ever really like that," says Ed Bryan. "We see all the early artwork, so it's not like they've committed themselves to this big thing and then we don't like it. Most of the stuff they've added has been in some way connected to the game, but sometimes they'll come to us with a house and say: 'How about this?' And we just have to say: 'Well, no. The house looks like this because it has to work in this way during the game.'

"None of us have ever had experience making something alongside a TV series, and it's easy to underestimate how much it involves. We're sent scripts every week, which have to be checked, and the same goes for the artwork."

And is the studio kept informed of any non-electronic merchandising plans? Toys or books, for example? "Yes and no," replies production director **Simon Farmer**. "That's down to the marketing department. We ultimately have control over what they do, but they're not really at the level yet where they're thinking about where to target that."

"Of course, the other thing is that this is still a new show for them," adds Will Bryan, "and the last thing they want is to go overboard and sacrifice their integrity."

"None of us have any experience making something alongside a TV series, and it's easy to underestimate how much it involves"

THE GRID RUNNER

AS HIS EMPIRE OF LIGHT AND MUSIC GROWS, WE VISIT TETSUYA MIZUGUCHI'S TOKYO BASE TO DISCOVER WHAT HE SEES – AND HEARS – WHEN HE LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

It's a long road from a *Sega Rally* track to the abstract spacescapes of *Every Extend Extra* (reviewed on p86), but it's a journey that one of Sega's best known auteurs has made in just over a decade. Although titles like *Rez* and *Space Channel 5* cemented his reputation as a rhythm action hero, Mizuguchi's real aims have always been rather harder to understand. Now, as his studio Q Entertainment takes on projects as diverse as the massively multi-slayer *Nintety-Nine Nights* alongside the unstoppable spread of the *Lumines* brand to mobile phones, PS2 and Live Arcade, he explains his philosophy.

Music games, such as *Lumines*, *Guitar Hero* and *Singstar*, are more popular than ever, especially in the west. Do you think music and games have more parallels than music and film?

I want to believe that I have analysed the possible relations between game and music. Indeed, there are many similarities, or common ground, between both worlds – but there are also fundamental differences. The biggest one is that 'playing music' cannot equal 'playing a game'. These two experiences are very different. But at the same time, it is an interesting field to test ideas in order to bring these two worlds together. For example, *Space Channel 5* was in many ways an experiment to test the rhythm factor. As for *Rez* and *Lumines*, they're not about rhythm but rather about *supporting* the rhythm. The music comes out of how you play. But there is still a lot more to be done, and I believe a lot is to be expected in the near future on the use of games and music together. There are so many games players and music lovers around the world. The numbers are incredible – there should be a way to ally both.

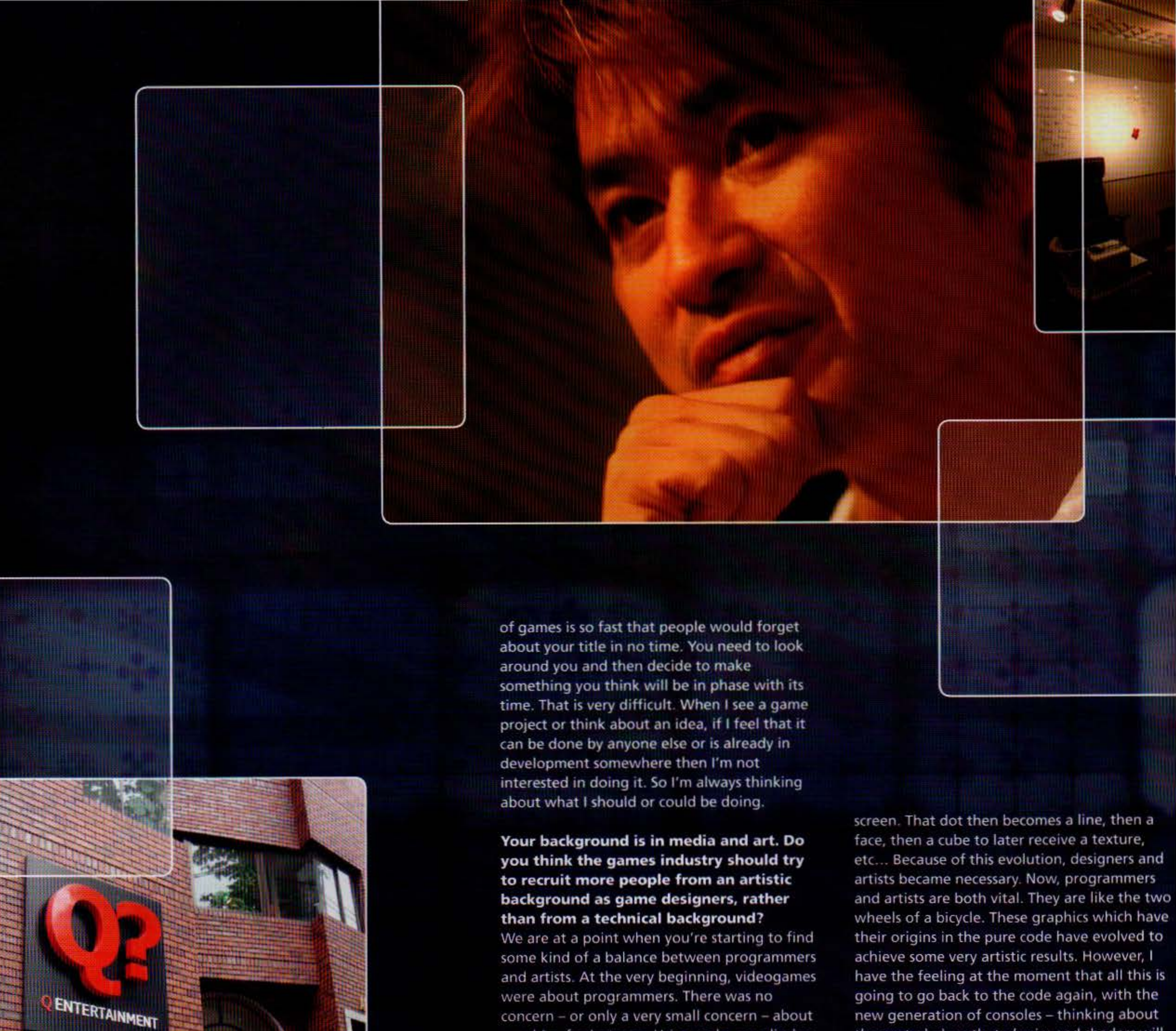
What sort of similarities do you see between games and music?

Videogames are very much a firstperson experience. You are alone, facing the screen. But music has the advantage of being able to offer a firstperson experience when playing it



and a thirdperson experience when you listen to it. A DJ, for instance, handles both these aspects of the music experience. When I started to make games using music, I had to play with these two aspects, so I used the music in the background in a thirdperson experience, but the game play itself could be compared to a DJ in action. Making music by pressing a button is an experience very close to a firstperson gaming experience.

There are very few game developers whose names are well known, but yours is. Why do you think people are able to look at your games and say: "That's a Mizuguchi game"? Do you think you put more of you personal life into your work than many other developers do?
I'm not trying to input anything special into my games. My route has not been paved entirely with success. It had many bumps and obstacles. If you are obsessed with success, then nothing rich is going to come out of you – the life-cycle



of games is so fast that people would forget about your title in no time. You need to look around you and then decide to make something you think will be in phase with its time. That is very difficult. When I see a game project or think about an idea, if I feel that it can be done by anyone else or is already in development somewhere then I'm not interested in doing it. So I'm always thinking about what I should or could be doing.

Your background is in media and art. Do you think the games industry should try to recruit more people from an artistic background as game designers, rather than from a technical background?

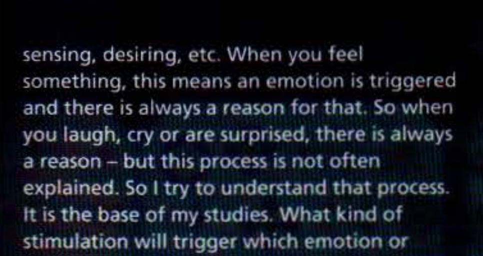
We are at a point when you're starting to find some kind of a balance between programmers and artists. At the very beginning, videogames were about programmers. There was no concern – or only a very small concern – about graphics, for instance. Using code, you display a dot that you can move anywhere on the screen. That dot then becomes a line, then a face, then a cube to later receive a texture, etc... Because of this evolution, designers and artists became necessary. Now, programmers and artists are both vital. They are like the two wheels of a bicycle. These graphics which have their origins in the pure code have evolved to achieve some very artistic results. However, I have the feeling at the moment that all this is going to go back to the code again, with the new generation of consoles – thinking about the central place that physics and shaders will have. So the best plan is to have a very talented programmer who has a very good artistic sense, or the other way round.

At the moment the industry is very focused on realistic graphics and elaborate plots and stories. Do you think people underestimate the power of more abstract game design?

I don't personally think I'm going for the abstract. It's not my objective. In Japan we have the word 'mediabigaku', which translates as 'media aesthetic'. When I'm troubled about what direction to take, 'mediabigaku' is the one place I can take refuge and think about my next step. It is about people feeling,

Q Entertainment started small, but already dominates the puzzle genre with *Lumines* and *Meteos*. Its latest, *Every Extend*, is reviewed on p86





sensing, desiring, etc. When you feel something, this means an emotion is triggered and there is always a reason for that. So when you laugh, cry or are surprised, there is always a reason – but this process is not often explained. So I try to understand that process. It is the base of my studies. What kind of stimulation will trigger which emotion or reaction? For example, do factors like race, nationality or gender have any impact? If so, how do they influence the outcome? This study is my life's work, and the results are almost the blueprints of my designs. These blueprints are not coming from game genres that already exist. For example, I won't make a game from the 'realistic' genre just because realism is popular among developers today. I prefer to focus on people's feelings and deliver something which is in phase with that. So, from that perspective, I may choose to use realism to achieve that objective.

The basis of 'mediabigaku' thinking is about the media and technology you find in your everyday life. These are extensions of what people felt and sensed in the first place – they are the final products of thoughts and designs delivered by people. They are emotions made into solid objects and they move beyond the body of the person who first thought them. But these objects then have to interact with other people who may reject them because they don't fit their personality, feeling or tastes. If that happens, it means the design was bad – if your thinking was not right, then people may reject your design as useless, not interesting or not practical. Software follows the same path as these objects, this need to fit people's feelings. But there is also a kind of cycle, a wave pattern For example, a game may have been successful a year earlier, but if it's released now it produces almost no reaction from the public. So you can't plan everything, as there is also some kind of a coincidence factor. It's a question of being lucky or unlucky – you can't possibly plan everything, so if you keep developing charismatic games you should end up with some of them surfing that wave and being successful. That's all I can think of in my work right now.

"WHAT KIND OF STIMULATION WILL TRIGGER WHICH REACTION? THIS STUDY IS MY LIFE'S WORK AND THE RESULTS ARE MY DESIGNS"

So where does a game like *Ninety-Nine Nights* fit into this theory?

N3 is very much about that. I tried to use HD and realism as part of my long-term 'mediabigaku' search. My quest for a new kind of entertainment brought me to *N3*. This is an action game, but the inspiration for it is hidden away. Today, you have lots of conflicts around the world. The internet gives you the story from any angle, from every side. You can sense the difference between sides – one single conflict but with different ways to view it. There is no happy ending. And so the game does not end with the victory of one single side. I wanted to make users feel this. They will get the entire vision of the conflict through each of the different sides who are at war. There is not one single answer but many. There is also, in that regard, lots of influence from Akira Kurosawa, a movie named Rashomon. But it is very hard to communicate this aspect of the game to players – they may not even notice my message. When I present my game to the marketing people, after having explained everything, they often reply: "So, it's an action game". And I have to admit that it is. I have no problem with the game being sold as an action game featuring numerous units on the battlefield, but I hope some users will feel what I wanted to deliver and spread the word. But that takes time.

Many times, I think my games are difficult for the marketing department to understand, so I let them promote them the way they feel comfortable with. Take *Lumines*, for example. When I presented the game, the publisher's



Photography: **Hiroki Izumi**

reaction was: "A puzzle game? As a music game?" This was to explain to me there was no market for puzzle or music games. Maybe I was just lucky the game was there at the launch so it got all the attention!

What's the position with *Rez*? You've spoken before about wanting to do a sequel. Would you be able to acquire the rights from Sega? If you could make it, what would it be like?

A sequel to *Rez* would require Sega's approval as the company owns the IP. I've thought for quite some time about what a possible sequel would be like. However, this is not necessarily *Rez 2* – it could be another game with a different title. I have a very personal link to *Rez* – it was a very personal creation. We used what power was available at that time and used it to its maximum. So, for this reason, *Rez* as a concept (rather than as an IP), has never been over for me. With new consoles, I could bring more power to the graphics and make use of the 5.1 channel sound. Basically the possibilities are enormous for a 'sequel' or this new title.

Q started off as a small developer, but it already has a wide range of projects underway. Is this because it's a necessary policy for a small studio if it wants to be successful, or is it because you have too many ideas?

To be honest, there is may be no need to do so many, and such different things. But I just want to do them. There is also a clear vision of the future. What I need the most is time. I really want to bring my ideas to life as quickly as possible. I'm almost pressured to deliver these visions as soon as possible, perhaps because those visions seem so clear to me. But I don't want to rush anything as the result would be anything but what I would like. I still keep a natural creative process which has its own pace.

You've been making games for 15 years now – what do you feel you understand about games now that you didn't understand when you started?

Well, I don't need to be patient any more. When I started, I had no experience in making games so I spent lot of time learning. So I needed to be patient, in positive and negative ways. But starting this company with my friends gave me lots of freedom. That does not mean it's easy every day but it is somewhat 'healthier'. At Sega, you are part of a large company which has it own processes. But here you need to adapt and do without them. In the current company, should you lose your creativity, you'll start to struggle. It is instant. So it's far from being easy, but it means I can do what I want and this is priceless.

The thing I learnt the most during all these years is certainly my understanding of people, of the audience, in a way. I travelled around the world, met a large number of people, did tons of things and tried many others. I realised the potential to make games for people around the world, knowing the incredible number of them on this planet. Imagine a few hundreds of millions of people among these billions buying a console, and then releasing a game to this massive audience, without any borders. Now with the disappearance of the physical media, through the use of the PC or the mobile phone, you can aim at an even larger audience. My main concern is to try to know who is at the other end – the users. For example, what is the audience I would like to reach on a platform I'm working on? The more





you think about games, the more you focus on the people. Humans are all the same at their early stage, but with time – as they become adults – they evolve through education and their cultural environment, their national roots. This is when they build their own personality, their own world. Now, when you bring them a title, it is very interesting to see everybody's reaction to it knowing all these differences. I think it is the most interactive thing you could experience. One game might have produced nothing in the past, but would create a large reaction now. I think it is about being cool or not, by which I mean appealing. I believe there are things which are not seen as cool today which will be cool in 30 or 50 years from now. In the entertainment industry, music and movies were until now its backbone. Now games are becoming true interactive entertainment. I think people in the future will categorise entertainment between interactive and non-interactive forms, making their choices accordingly. Some will prefer interactivity while others will prefer passivity.

Do you think you will still be making games in another 15 years?
I think I won't only be focused on gaming, but yes, I will continue to create in the 15 years to come. But I have the feeling my attention is getting attracted by things other than gaming, like music and music videos. I'm already starting to challenge myself outside the industry. This may give me new experiences that I can use later in games as well. I'm already using my videogame experience in the new stuff I'm starting now – specifically a music video. I used my experience in *Rez* to create a synergy between the audio and the video. I don't want to do only music or only video – I want both.

"I BELIEVE THERE ARE THINGS WHICH ARE NOT SEEN AS COOL TODAY WHICH WILL BE COOL IN 30 OR 50 YEARS FROM NOW"




CLUNKclick.
CLUNKsquee.
SLAM!
SPLUNCH!
speesh
WORT!
WORT!
WORT!
HAD-O-KEN!
Wacca-wacca-wacca-wacca-wacca

SONIC BOOM

Often overlooked, videogame sound design is finding its voice – and it's saying that less is more, and what you see is not necessarily what you hear

TOOOOM

chk-chk

baDing!

ner ner NAA!

When videogame sound is discussed, the most common topics revolve around music and voice acting. The first is a blossoming mini-industry in its own right, with soundtrack albums, licensing clout and a healthy nostalgia scene, the second a more contentious focus of the medium's growing pains as it struggles with the subtleties of the dramatic arts. In all this hubbub, it often seems as if the humble sound effect is being overlooked, even though it was videogames' very first voice – even though half a second of sound can have all the evocative power of half an hour of theme tunes: the chime of Mario's coins, the ominous creak and slam of *Resident Evil*'s door, the hollow boom of *Doom*'s shotgun.

The same goes for the discipline of sound design, the art of creating these sounds and then blending them with music and voice into a soundtrack that will both inform and excite the player. Sound designers and the audio programmers that work with them are some of gaming's unsung heroes, working in the shadow of musicians and actors as well as their colleagues in graphic art and technology. In recent years they've managed their own quantum leap into three-dimensional space, as support for surround sound home cinema systems has become the norm, and coped with demands for filmic sound quality from an unpredictable, non-linear, interactive environment. The new generations of home consoles and PC sound cards (such as Creative's new X-Fi standard) have raised the fidelity bar again, but how is videogame sound to evolve beyond mere improvements in quality? We

EEEooo EEEooo EEEooo

spoke to a handful of the best minds in British game sound, and one legendary film soundman, to find out.

What makes a great sound effect? There can be few people better qualified to answer that question than **Randy Thom**, a sound designer at George Lucas' Skywalker Sound facility. Regarded as one of the best in the business, Thom began his career working under the great Walter Murch – who practically invented creative sound design in his revolutionary work with Francis Ford Coppola in the '70s, on The Godfather, The Conversation and Apocalypse Now – and has two Oscars (for The Incredibles and The Right Stuff) and 12 nominations to his name. He and his team are making their videogame debut by refining the audio on Vivendi and Radical's *Scarface*. As UK industry veteran **John Broomhall** notes, the fact that Thom is going "anywhere near a game" is very significant in itself.

"A sound effect needs to really connect with the audience," says Thom. "A great sound effect is something that is accurate and powerful – something that reacts to the immediate environment, so that it sounds exactly like it should in real life, without the audience even realising it. It needs to flow gracefully from one moment to the next. Often when sounds are carelessly added the end result is what I'd describe as a wall of noise."

This cacophony – brought on by the use of too many sounds at once, and a lack of sensitivity to context in their implementation – is immediately identified by those working in the field as the most common pitfall of game sound.

"There can be a lot of very good, creative sound design that's been completed by a whole team, but the most important part is the final realtime interactive mix. You can have fantastic work but if it's thrown at you all in one go you're not going to hear it," says **Stephen Root**, audio director at Criterion whose work on the *Burnout* games and, more recently, *Black* is widely admired. "You need to let things unfold more, have starting points, let things grow, come down and have other sounds. I don't think people think enough about the event that is happening at that one point in the game and play the right sound for it. They play too many sounds and it makes it less memorable, and you don't get the clarity. You could have a car crash, you could play a whole load of different sounds, metal twisting, glass, skids – but if you just focus on the body twisting for those few frames of the game, then you're telling an aural story."

"A GREAT SOUND EFFECT IS SOMETHING THAT IS ACCURATE AND POWERFUL – IT SOUNDS EXACTLY LIKE IT SHOULD IN REAL LIFE"



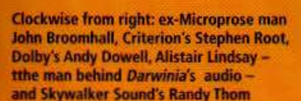
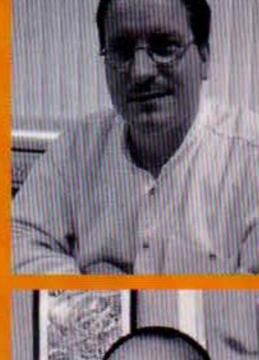
Criterion's Stephen Root is a fan of the audio design in Ubisoft's *King Kong*. "It just sounds phenomenal. I found the brontosaurus stampede truly terrifying. To capture that and put it across – absolutely brilliant. They've got wonderful atmospheres that are moving constantly through the game"

"This is a big problem for many freelance sound designers, they create great material and then some programmer just attaches the sound to a game trigger and leaves it at that," agrees **Nick Wiswell**, audio manager at Bizarre Creations – whose *Project Gotham Racing 3* is regarded as an early benchmark for next-generation surround sound. "In order for a game to sound good the sound effects need to be triggered correctly and then manipulated to ensure they sound part of the game world – for example, the same sound should be very different if it is close to you or in the distance."

For his part, Root avoids ear fatigue by working with the level designers, obsessively building a dynamic, changing sound into every scenario in the game. "I get them to plan out all the possible instances that can happen in a level and I pick out the blockbuster moments. I look



"The most important thing is to get the effect the surrounding environment has on the sound effect right," says Thom, of his work on *Scarface*'s audio. "It's no good recording the sound of a gunshot in an open field, then trying to apply it to firing indoors – it'll just sound like a pop gun."




Clockwise from right: ex-Microprose man John Broomhall, Criterion's Stephen Root, Dolby's Andy Dowell, Alistair Lindsay – tthe man behind *Darwinia's* audio – and Skywalker Sound's Randy Thom

TODAY'S SOUND TOMORROW

With 360's first birthday creeping ever closer, the next generation of console audio is already in the shops, but its future is still uncertain; Sony and Nintendo have yet to clarify the exact audio specifications of their next consoles. PS3 will certainly support full, digital surround, but even Dolby doesn't know if their technology will be built-in from the word go or shipped on a licensing model with games, as with PS2. ("PS3's specs have been held up by Blu-ray... the Blu-ray camp haven't even locked down the audio specifications for their player yet," notes Dowell.) Nintendo, meanwhile, has eschewed a digital output and gone with straight analogue stereo, meaning developers who want surround will have to resort to Dolby's Pro Logic II encoding.

at a flow plan of all the possible routes a level can take, and I try and make each one have high points and low points, and make a plan of sound journeys through the level. I try to find those few split seconds of silence before the big thing happens at the end. You've got to have quiet to have loud."

Of course, sculpting a dynamic sound mix in this way is one thing in a linear medium like film, and quite another in games, when timing and movement are largely decided by the player. **Andy Dowell**, Dolby's senior account manager for consumer technologies in Europe – and so someone with a good view of both sides of the fence – is in awe of what the best audio teams achieve. "Behind guys like Stephen and Nick are programmers who maybe don't get as much exposure as the audio leads... But if you're think about what they're doing in realtime, at any moment they need the code to make intelligent decisions about volume, how to draw attention to a certain sound; they put AI in to vary sounds so it's not too monotonous. They're programming a realtime Hollywood mixing engineer, a piece of code that can make artistic decisions based on what's going on, positional information, physics."

Broomhall – who worked for the likes of MicroProse and Infogrames before striking out as an independent audio director and consultant – contends that this apparent alchemy is as much a matter of hard work, planning and attention to detail as anything else: "Compared to film, it's harder to create a balanced mix because you have to set things up in code, and you have to think very carefully about the game states and define rules for how to create the mix to create the sort of things that we're referring to. It's about creating consistent rules, but it's all doable, and thank goodness people are trying to do those sorts of things."

The twin demands of the art and technology of modern sound design – these realtime dynamic sound mixers on the one hand, the increased detail of next-generation soundscapes on the other – mean developers' sound departments have one pressing need above all others right now: talented staff. "The extra power and memory available also means we need to create more content and implement it to a higher quality standard than before, and this means more staff," says Wiswell. "When we created Treasure Planet for Disney in 2002 there were just two of us creating the audio, now we have a team of eight people on site, one full time contractor working from the US and dedicated audio staff with some of our publishers helping to source and record the audio we need. It's also interesting to note the differences in staffing levels between films and games; films complete the sound much quicker but they usually have many specialists who concentrate on just one area. Game sound designers generally look after all aspects of the sounds, and when you are working on a project for long periods, it can be hard to keep an objective ear."

"There will inevitably be smaller developers that haven't really thought about how the stakes have been raised and what they're going to have to do to deliver their first next-gen product," adds Broomhall. "The process, the integration, the resourcing and the technology are all big issues – and audio programmers are like gold dust. Audio programming hasn't been regarded as something that's very sexy or at the cutting edge of games, just a fairly utilitarian thing that needs doing. Programmers are more interested in doing fantastic visual effects – sound just hasn't had that profile. I think, I really hope that is beginning to change. There's no doubt in my mind that for people who want to be involved in sound coding there's a great opportunity. There are just not enough people out there



TONE CHALLENGE



When we asked what their favourite sound effects were, the Bizarre Creations audio team (above, left to right, Jon Cutter, Nick Bygrave, Nick Wiswell, Cian O'Flanagan, Sam Hall, Mathias Grunwaldt, Emma Jackson and Nick Raynor.) came up with a selection of eight that represents such a perfect cross-section of the sound designer's art and the gamers' instinctive responses to it, we had to reproduce it in full.

SYSTEM SHOCK 2 (1999)
The shrieking of the terrifying psi-monkeys in Irrational's legendary sci-fi horror leaves a deep and unpleasantly lasting impression. The simian presence in games is usually so much more benevolent that this

FINAL FANTASY VII (1997)
It was the Chocobo calls in Square's JRPG magnum opus that endeared it to one of the Bizarre team – tiny, succinct sounds have always been vital to cute-appeal in Japanese design.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (1991)
Mario's coins may have come first and may ring with a purer tone. But Sonic's ring pickup sounds are arguably even more iconic, intoxicating, and inextricably linked to the character.

SPEEDBALL II (1990)
"Ice cream! Ice cream!" It's a tiny and entirely incidental vocal sample, but everyone who plays the game remembers it; back when graphics were necessarily so figurative, sounds like this were important atmosphere builders.

HALF-LIFE 2 (2004)
Gun reports have played a vital part in the tactile satisfaction of FPS weaponry ever since *Doom*, but in *Half-Life 2* it's actually the crossbow which provides the most sonic gratification and keeps you using it time and again.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME (1998)
The chest-opening jingle, of course. What else? This joyous fanfare is one of those rare sounds that has become a tradition in its own right: "It builds such anticipation, and is such a jolly sound," says Wiswell.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS (2004)
Sound has a unique ability to communicate pain, and *San Andreas* is nominated for the "just realistically brutal" sound when CJ lands after launching himself off a mountain on a bike. Falling skaters in Tony Hawk's are another worthy contender here.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER (2002)
"Splooooosh! – the guy in the naval cannon minigame – this could be the most inspired piece of sound design of all time," reads the note from Bizarre. Is it an arch, self-aware nod to the smoke-and-mirrors game experience... or is it just funny?

with both the technical expertise and the creative sensibilities."

The long-term challenge, of course, is not just to get the staff, the processes and the code in place, but to learn how to exploit next-generation sound beyond just increasing file sizes. And beyond that, to start finding the same kind of unexpected, creative, expressive applications of game sound that led the revolution in film sound in the 1970s. The extra processing bandwidth available in new consoles affords considerable freedom, especially when it comes to applying post-production effects in realtime. "We now do almost all the digital signal processing in realtime using our proprietary audio engine," says Wiswell of the Bizarre team's next-gen approach. "It gives us the freedom to try new ideas very quickly and easily. It is now the implementation of the sounds, and what we do with them once in the game, that is taking up most of the time."



***Black*, a masterpiece of sonic overstatement, always stays the right side of chaos. "I couldn't believe the bass," says Dolby's Dowell, no stranger to low frequencies himself. "They've got a game that is massively over the top, yet it's not a cacophony"**

simple refinement. **Alistair Lindsay**, a freelance sound designer (formerly of Rare and Frontier) whose current collaboration with indie darlings Introversion began with his striking, experimental soundtrack for *Darwinia*, sums it up: "There is a danger with granularisation that it becomes an extension of what games are already doing, just a more complicated version of a software sampler. You've got to go further than that."

Root is concerned that the expanding possibilities might be as much of a curse as a blessing: "The limitations are just going away,

"WHAT GAME AUDIO CAN TAKE FROM FILM IS A FULL APPRECIATION OF THE CRAFT AND ARTISTRY IN THE APPLICATION OF SOUND"

One prominent new technique – notably used by the Bizarre team in *PGR3* – will be to break sounds down into much smaller constituent parts and let the audio engine piece them back together, resulting in much less repetitive, more natural textures. Broomhall refers to it as "a more granular approach" and gives several examples of sounds – crowd noise, the crackle and pop of fire, the babble of running water – that are commonly done with looped samples now but will, in future, never play the same twice. But many feel the changes in approach can't stop with such

but that makes the job harder than ever; the biggest challenge is deciding what sound to play where at what part, how you control it, how you deliver it. We could do too much by a long way." Just as in graphics, technical advances can slow down artistic development in the rush to put the new horsepower in the service of blunt realism; Broomhall notes that "the 3D audio systems that have come to the fore over the last few years have tended to point people in the direction of very literal sound.

"For me, what game audio can take from film is a full appreciation of the craft and artistry in the application of sound," he continues. "What that means for me is in many instances going beyond the literal approach. Not just describing the world but describing perceptions of the world, underpinning certain moments or changing the focus using sound, creatively using the mix."

OoWOOooWOOooW

DRRRRIL DRRRRRIL

This kind of subjective, creative flourish in the realtime mix is still rare in videogames; one small, but strikingly clever and economical example is the 'choir of guns' Root and his team implemented in *Black*. "Basically, we'd referenced through a lot of FPS titles – we played them all really – and what was tending to happen was with your player weapon, team-mates' weapons and the enemies', there were a lot of guns all firing at the same time, and it was just a noise, a cacophony," he explains. "We tried to brainstorm ways to deal with this and we came up with an analogy which we called the choir of guns. We'd focus on the three nearest enemies firing at one time. Say they were all firing AK47s, we'd make one have a middle range noise, one a really bassy one, one a high crackling sound. Then when we built the sound for the player gun, we'd adjust it so it would sound nice with all those guns firing at once, so they'd almost harmonise. We did that for every kind of gun that enemies can have." Not only did this make the game sound much more rounded and satisfying, it had benefits in terms of the sound designer's primary responsibility, informing players, by helping them pick out where enemies were. Small wonder Criterion's audio team has, according to Dowell, been taking the lead within EA since the publishing giant bought the developer.



***Project Gotham Racing 3*'s sound design is often overlooked by those dazzled by the game's hi-def detail, but the distinct character of each vehicle depends just as much on the noise it makes as on the loving recreation of its dashboard detailing**



Even though *Black*'s chords of gunfire do break with the standard, literal interpretation of sound in most games, they are but a small step beyond the traditional 'hyper-reality' of sound in games and action movies, and towards what Broomhall calls "non-literal sound that is there to produce an emotional effect, support the narrative, provide focus, contrast with the pictures." Unsurprisingly, it falls to indie maverick Lindsay to dare give voice to the experimental urge: "You need to cater to both information and immersion otherwise things would be completely abstract, but actually you've got to go further than either those options. The audio engine has to go forwards and backwards in time, use audio from different timeframes in the game the way a film might return to a motif associated with a certain character or feeling, and feed that back to the player. Otherwise all you're doing is just show and tell." But Broomhall is confident these ambitions are shared by those working in the mainstream of game sound, too. "I think that a lot of people in game audio have wanted to do more complex things along the lines of what we're talking about – Kenny Young [from SCEE] talked a lot about this stuff at the Develop conference – but they've been limited by technology and resourcing and time. This is a point in the history of game audio where I think that will change."

Lindsay is looking forward to his next project with Introversion; he and programmer Chris Delay are hoping to implement a system that will respond to players' actions by using the pyschotropic effects of certain resonances, frequencies and rhythms to deliberately alter their emotional state as they play. But what's truly surprising is his source material: "I'm really drawing on ideas that have been around for thousands of years. There are ancient buildings – barrows, temples, pyramids – that produce harmonics and resonance in specific frequency bandwidths when certain sounds are produced there (mostly vocal chanting). These can really affect the emotional responses of anyone exposed to them. The rhythms of a Shaman's drumming have a similar effect". The circle is completed; as game sound design starts to look beyond itself for ways in which it might evolve, it's finding out that the art of interactive audio design is perhaps much older than we might think. And it looks like it might be about to discover itself all over again.



Lindsay's synthetic soundtrack for Introversion's *Darwinia* was a perfect mate for the visuals. "It was what we would do if we had a time machine, and could take today's tech back to when the classic arcade games were being made"

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Disgaea 2



It's a game where nothing is wasted, except every single second of your spare time. Going from level one to level 40 in a single kill remains unquenchably addictive
PS2, ATLUS/KOEI

OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast



Widescreen, HD (albeit with some coarse upscaled GUI objects) and silky smooth, the definitive home version resets our *OutRun* mileage and clocks up plenty of its own
PC, SEGA

We Love Katamari



Western *Katamari* fans may still feel like a privileged cult, but it's worth savouring play now before the IP inevitably becomes the corporate face of Namco Bandai
PS2, NAMCO

You've lost the lead

As gaming surges forwards, are gamers falling behind?



***Test Drive Unlimited* serves a niche market, but represents a crucial shift towards high profile risk taking. Its unusual blend of online and offline play is sure to scare people off, but do they really know whether they'd like it or not?**

Genres are being dissected and rebuilt more vigorously now than they have been for a long time, and with games such as *Dead Rising* and *Test Drive Unlimited* leading the charge, this month is as good a time as any to marvel at the unprecedented versatility of modern consoles.

But the realisation isn't coming as naturally as it should. Already, there's a belief that these titles are merely experiments in scale – hi-tech distractions that don't do enough to contribute to gaming's future. Most recently it was American McGee who bemoaned Microsoft and Sony's shared vision, denying their next-generation status and citing Nintendo as the single innovator – the single advocate of honest-to-God gaming.

Even without consideration of Xbox Live Arcade, Game Studio Xpress or indeed whatever PS3 has in store, this point of view is absurd. Rather ironically, it's out of date as well. As we get to grips with the likes of *Rising* and *TDU*, it's clear that we're past the point where gaming has to evolve in vast, logical leaps. Like computer-aided Hollywood, it's found itself at a place where anything is possible, and is already keen to explore without necessarily pulling its audience to its feet for a more energetic game of tennis.

It seems that some gamers used to the quick march of progress are having trouble slowing down, still expecting another *Mario 64* when the future is actually subtler, more specific, and more focused. More to the point, the future is now. With games like *Spore*, *Army Of Two* and *Bioshock*, experimentation is going mainstream, and perhaps it's the audience – not just the *FIFA* fans, but the naysayers and everyone else – that needs to make an effort. Perhaps it's our own risk-aversion that deserves the spotlight, the trait that makes it easy to accuse Microsoft and Sony of being in it for the money.

It's a natural instinct, certainly – judging games by their premise, holding out for something quantifiably 'better', sticking to what you know. But can Eden, Atari or even Capcom survive if, when they do go out on a limb, no one actually follows? Of course they can, but only by taking us right back to where we were before. So perhaps gamers need to start taking some more risks, before complaining that publishers won't.



80 **Dead Rising** 360



82 **Test Drive Unlimited** 360, PC, PS2, PSP

84 **Yakuza** PS2

86 **Every Extend Extra** PSP

87 **Star Fox Command** DS



88 **Saints Row** 360



89 **GTR2** PC

90 **Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy** 360, GC, GBA, DS, PC, PS2, XBOX

92 **Bullet Witch** 360

93 **Contact** DS

94 **Gangs Of London** PSP

94 **B-Boy** PS2, PSP

95 **Rhythm Tengoku** GBA

95 **Mario Hoops: 3 On 3** DS

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



DEAD RISING

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 8
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: PRODUCTION STUDIO 1
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E156, E163, E164, E166







Rising's matter-of-fact take on pornography's charm is welcome, but the degree to which its fetishes for deviant behaviour are indulged throughout is startling. Beyond the erotica genre that joins horror, drama and outtake in sorting and scoring your photos, its cutscenes depict numerous ogles and molestations

With an erratic pace, unpredictable direction and complementary habits of falling flat on its face and getting straight back up, *Dead Rising* plays a more complete zombie than you'd ever have anticipated. Much of what it's achieved with its formidable brief – to create the world's first survival shopper game, staged in a fully-stocked environment worthy of both George A Romero and Xbox 360 – will have your jaw hanging off. Considering some of the bitter flaws that plague it en route, that should be enough to earn the game your forgiveness.

Learning the ropes of its new subgenre is to marvel at its behind-the-scenes demands. Blueprinting the arid razzle-dazzle of an entirely believable shopping mall must have been the easy part; lining the shelves and setting the displays of every store, annex and backroom with hundreds of faked-up brands and products must have been something else. All of it, remarkably, still represents the game's foundation-level design.

The more substantial challenge has been turning Frank West, a delightful concoction of hero and prick, into a balanced combination of everyman and superman. Charged with wielding, riding, hurdling, climbing and, don't forget, photographing a lion's share of what his environment presents, he has to guarantee the smoothest possible ride for players overwhelmed by diversely clothed and decomposed zombies, distorted psychopaths and, several twists down the line, far deadlier foes.



As is genre tradition across all media, it's the humans who are *Dead Rising*'s true enemies – the scientific meddlers, merciless terrorists and self-serving plunderers. Capcom's photorealistic textures bring their motives to life in truly exquisite fashion

When introduced last year he was barely alive himself, hobbled by an almost unplayable prototype build, but Frank's come a long way. Natural and yet nimble, his stride is enough to nudge bodies aside, his fists and feet strong enough to knock them down, his moveset upgradeable to include stabs at crowd-surfing, martial arts and wrestling. The control scheme switches efficiently between throw, photography and meleé views, with firearms snapping neatly into position with reticule primed. In all, he's a great compromise: still one of us but built to withstand a computer generated army rather than face-painted actors with latex guts.

As antagonists, these zombies are a revelation. Just as Romero had it, the mall was an important place for them, and watching them habitually push trolleys, stumble down the up escalators, queue for the amusement rides and patter on the Willamette doors is an uncannily authentic joy. Troublesome as individuals but inexorable en masse, they punish those who over-indulge or otherwise let their awareness slip. As in Dawn Of The Dead, the key to survival isn't speed, momentum or power, but care. Too long in a sniping position or behind the camera leaves you open for the chomp, and while plenty of weapons can cut a disembowelling swathe through whole mosh-pits of zombies, the empowerment must be managed sensibly; when the weapon breaks or runs dry, you'll need an answer for the groaning wave before it crashes upon your cocky head.



While plenty of weapons can cut a disembowelling swathe through whole mosh-pits of zombies, the empowerment must be managed sensibly

Frank curses himself for such stupidity when injured without cause – one of many casual nods to Dawn that supplement the carbon copied premise. And *Rising*'s no less referential in its structure. Across an accelerated timeframe that lasts 72 game-hours and, retries excluded, just over five actual hours, the critical missions of the game's primary mode are issued in the security room (one of the mall's few impenetrable retreats, accessed through a rooftop duct), while the abundant emerging 'scoop' opportunities are presented via radio.



By throwing enemies such as the True Eye cult into its ambient undead throng, *Rising* lends uncommon weight to its secondary objectives. Should you forgo the opportunity to engage its leader in mortal combat, their split-second knife attacks and Monty Python suicide bombings will continue to plague the mall









The fixed schedule of events brings with it a familiar sticking point – a period of dead time in which straying from the rendezvous point is too risky, and staying in the room is devoid of event. Thankfully, this *Shenmue*-revisiting exercise is seldom required and quick to end





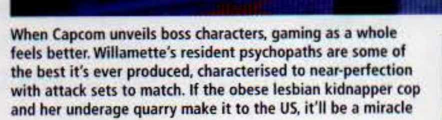


Occurring between one preset time and another, they all impose a strict, sometimes ruthless schedule upon your sandbox killathon. Miss the allocated window and you lose the mission (commonly a boss battle followed by civilian rescue attempt), its Prestige Points reward, and potentially the entire story thread as well.

If that suggestion of escort missions sets your teeth on edge, then grit them hard because *Rising's* allied AI is its most rotten limb. Throwing a grand experiment in AI management into its wealth of existing burdens is just the kind of overzealous foul-up to earn one of Frank's rebukes, and of the various means by which you're expected to guide people back to the security room – holding hands, shouting, leading the way and offering piggybacks – only the last is reliable, the rest failing with irksome regularity and consequence. A lesser moan is an inventory system that files items in order of acquisition, cycling them automatically if the object in use expires. Since button-mashing is a primary interaction, the inevitable result is that stockpiled objects such as health (food and drink items) are used accidentally.

You fast come to appreciate that *Dead Rising* does everything big, including its mistakes. Offering only one save slot is a particularly hazardous example, and when you commit your progress to hard drive, you'd better make sure you have enough time left to meet that next critical deadline or it's game (the story part, at least) over. But Production Studio 1's buckshot approach to design, aiming wide and hitting hard, achieves a successful, albeit unorthodox balance. Because its explorative hack and slash is so visceral, its point-scoring opportunities tucked up so many sleeves, its attention to detail so immeasurably fine and its engine – the lovingly-crafted tide of undead that makes for such an enduring toy – so immaculately tuned, it returns to its feet as grand and remarkable an achievement as it was before it fell down.

Thematically eccentric, mechanically shambolic and technically stunning, *Dead Rising* is the kind of infectious experience that yearns for a sequel, though that's far from guaranteed considering its pinpoint premise and proximity to *Resident Evil*. As well as paving the way for the game's greatest Dawn omission – "We got this by the ass!" – a co-op mode would give even a straight Willamette reprise a whole new lease of life, should it ever actually need one. **[8]**



When Capcom unveils boss characters, gaming as a whole feels better. Willamette's resident psychopaths are some of the best it's ever produced, characterised to near-perfection with attack sets to match. If the obese lesbian kidnapper cop and her underage quarry make it to the US, it'll be a miracle







72 Hours Later



Suggesting the final act of a game's story to be bonus content might seem disingenuous, but Overtime mode, unlocked by completing *Dead Rising*'s 72 Hour mode with storyline intact, has been nobly separated. Perhaps out of reverence, it curdles Capcom's passions for high powered action and sci-fi conspiracy away from Romero's vision, leaving the main quest to enjoy an ambiguous premise, narrative loose ends and faithful rooftop ending. And then, with scores summarised and kill count reset, it's Inafune's turn. Overtime's new objectives may be treasure hunts, the twists clumsy and the true endgame tacked on, but the change in dynamic is electrifying, and the resolution a great deal more substantial. For *Crisis Zone* fans, specifically, it'll feel like Christmas come early.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, PSP PRICE: £50 (360), £30 (OTHERS)
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 8 (360), NOVEMBER (OTHERS) PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: EDEN GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E153, E157, E164, E165





Graphically, *Test Drive Unlimited* is subtly effective rather than technically stunning. It lacks *PGR3*'s photoreal precision but also its sterility, trading polys for a convincingly lush setting. Pop-up is noticeable but entirely forgivable

In all the excitement over *Test Drive Unlimited*, it's been easy to forget that the free-roaming racing game has been attempted before. Indeed, the genre's top-selling franchise *Need For Speed* has already tried it, with some success, in last year's *Most Wanted*. But the landscape of EA's games – compressed, exaggerated, curtailed by progressive unlocking – is as unreal as a model set next to *Test Drive Unlimited*'s Hawaiian setting. Based very closely on the island of Oahu, this is a believable, contiguous real-world space on a scale seldom attempted in games of any sort before, and save for a couple of unlockable racing circuits, it's entirely free to explore from the start, off-road as well as on. It may not be that dense or interactive a gaming arena, but it is beautiful and subtly varied, perfectly to scale, and it lends massive credibility to this trailblazing racer.

The sudden enthusiasm, since *Project Gotham Racing 2*, of players and developers for the 14 country miles of the Nordschleife Nürburgring demonstrated something: that driving game fans were tiring of tight circuits and yearning to take the long and winding road. And Oahu is a breathtaking, bottomless resource of hundreds of miles of road of every conceivable kind: city street, suburban lane, sweeping coastal highway, bustling four-lane freeway and steep mountain switchback. There is far too much to get familiar with, making this a very different flavour of driving experience – not about learning tracks and mastering technique as much as reading the road and the traffic ahead, and instinctive car control in unexpected situations. It is, in short, just like driving, to the extent that when just exploring the island or taking part in more leisurely challenges, you'll find yourself unaccountably observing traffic signals, looking left and right at junctions, even



of motorbikes. Even when driving in anger and without traffic, the conditions mean you won't automatically be pushing your machine to its limit as in a circuit racer, but staying comfortably inside it, watching for a clear opportunity to open up. Oddly, this doubly reinforces your awareness of the speed and power at your control, your fear and exhilaration at taking a monster supercar out into the world. When coupled with the showroom shopping experience (and tiny details like the need to start your engine before driving off) this is where the game



It is, in short, just like driving. You'll find yourself unaccountably observing traffic signals, looking left and right at junctions, overtaking properly

overtaking properly – despite the complete, and wise, lack of damage modelling.

What's different from everyday road experience, of course, is what you're driving: something from the game's esoterically varied, if not comprehensive, selection of classic and modern exotica, all capable of 140mph at the least and including a handful

fully, brilliantly realises the concept, enshrined in the franchise's title but long forgotten, of the test drive. There are more accurate, supple and entertaining simulations of these cars' handling out there than *Test Drive Unlimited*'s, for sure (although with driving aids off it's more than adequate, with good road surface feedback) but there's no better emotional simulation.

When it comes to the substance, structure and set-dressing of a major modern videogame, Eden has been similarly adventurous, with more mixed results. The design of the challenges themselves is mostly excellent, if fairly easygoing in the difficulty stakes. Conventional races, time trials and speed tests cover a huge range of roads, driving styles and distances, over point-to-point and circuit plans, some with and some without traffic. Giving lifts to shoppers and hitchhikers, or delivering contraband packages, requires a fine balance between fast and safe driving. Best of all are the car



With no damage modelling, the only penalty for bad driving is a police chase, and if caught a fine. Cops are thin on the ground so it's rare to incur one of these, but the financial penalty is steep late in the game







Navigating Oahu's expanse and the game's features and challenges would be completely unmanageable without its excellent virtual GPS system, with voice, map and turning indicators taking you to any destination you require – and even guiding you round the otherwise unmarked race courses



Motorbikes are unlocked by touring every dealership, a pleasant but huge task that's a chore if you're in a hurry. There's no need to be: they're a novelty side-dish, scary in cockpit view but with unrefined, unconvincing handling









A test drive is a click away, but viewing cars in the showroom is one of the most indulgent pleasures in a game full of them, compelling you to act out the full consumer dream

With garage space at a premium and a house purchase to budget for, you'll find yourself making your initial car-buying decisions with a mixture of thrift and sentimentality. The Esprit and Mustang are both very cheap and effective cars for their classes, but the British bias that steered us away from the Audi and Mercedes dealers and toward the TVRs is pure patriotism

delivery missions which let you take the rarest, fastest hardware in the game for a spin and don't set a time limit, but scrub off their huge cash rewards with every scrape or off-road excursion. Seldom, if ever, has a game so perfectly encapsulated the battle between temptation and self-control.

The unlock structure is also smart, measuring progress by Gamerscore, which with a broad range of achievements available (covering clothes shopping and exploration as well as single and multiplayer race medals) means you can make headway in your own style. Unfortunately, *Test Drive Unlimited* trips up over its most unusual elements – its lifestyle trappings and MMO-style dedication to a physically real space. The enticement of home ownership is lessened when you realise that a house is a glorified menu, and you can't even look around your garage in firstperson (a shame when the game otherwise carefully nurtures a sense of pride and possession over rapacious collection).

Every challenge and function – from car dealership to clubhouse, offline race to online – has to be physically visited before you can access it directly, must be selected from the cumbersome map interface even after that and is prefaced by a lengthy animation. It wouldn't be the same game if it didn't require some casual exploration, but all too often the impossibility of simply browsing cars and challenges makes the whole island-life conceit feel like an unnecessary, unwieldy crust of complication between you and the meat of the game.

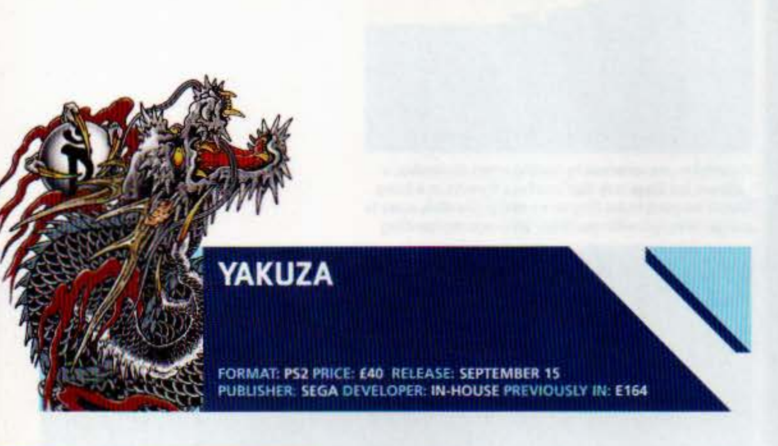
This is likely to take its heaviest toll where Eden seeks to use it to innovate most, in the game's online life. It's hard to predict how its promise of massively multiplayer racing – with each server, each copy of Oahu hosting a hundred or more drivers – will work out, how smooth interactions between players will be, before those players arrive en masse come release. Certainly, seeing other drivers circulating around the island is a thrill, the cumulative prize money on user-created challenges is a brilliant stroke, and the friends' clubhouses will be invaluable; but with no quick-match options or lobby to browse everyday race meets, you'll be left picking a challenge on the map and hoping for the best. Unless the game is hugely busy it's likely to end up an insular, friends-only affair, surely the opposite of what was intended. And it's all too easy to see the dream of spontaneous racing in the wild being replaced by the reality of endless, infuriating games of chicken.

But that's just conjecture. Even if it were entirely offline, *Test Drive Unlimited* would still distinguish itself, both in and out of its genre, by offering relaxed, romantic wish fulfilment, a virtual vacation on a luxurious scale, and a timbre of thrill just close enough to real life to make it twice as sweet. Eden has composed a beguiling, intoxicating hymn to the open road, and every car lover will want to join its chorus. **[8]**

Marketplace conditions



Atari has caused a storm by announcing that it will launch *Test Drive Unlimited* on 360 at a mere $40 (£21) in the US but at full price in Europe. The rationale is to flood the US's healthy Live userbase and then profit from downloadable content, the first new cars and radio playlists coming just six weeks after launch. It would balance things out to include some of this content in the default European package, but it's not known whether Atari will be so fair-minded. Another unknown is exactly what form *Test Drive Unlimited* will take when it arrives on PS2 and PSP in November, courtesy of Melbourne House, alongside Eden's PC port: doubtless cut-down, but a substantial online component is still promised.



YAKUZA

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 15
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164





Vulnerable, plucky Haruka (above) is a pivotal plot presence, but also the source of a couple of greatly amusing moments. At times, she'll tag along with Kazuma as he roams, cheering on from the sidelines during fights and making requests for what game to play next at the casino

Since its reinvention, Sega has done anything but lick its wounds, instead industriously moulding itself a new empire of franchises from the interesting, to the muted, to the commercially savvy – *Spartan: Total Warrior*, *Football Manager*, *Condemned*, *Full Auto* and so on. And yet *Yakuza* feels like the first truly *Sega* Sega game to appear on a home console since *Outrun 2*. It's the kind of game whose characters will be cried out for in sequels, and cried over if no such follow-ups appear, a game with a powerful story to tell and vibrant and amusing ideas to back it up – a game with a heart, then. And, as is another trademark for the best regarded of Sega's titles, there are bugbears in the experience that don't so much ruin it as cause some to wonder what all the fuss is about.

You can easily draw a weighty handful of parallels between *Yakuza* and *Shenmue*, even though it feels like an academic exercise – their open worlds are rich in NPCs, and place a strong accent on a plot that progresses through grand cutscenes and one-on-many combat scenarios that lack a certain slickness. But it's hard not to think of *Yakuza* as an alternate-reality resultant



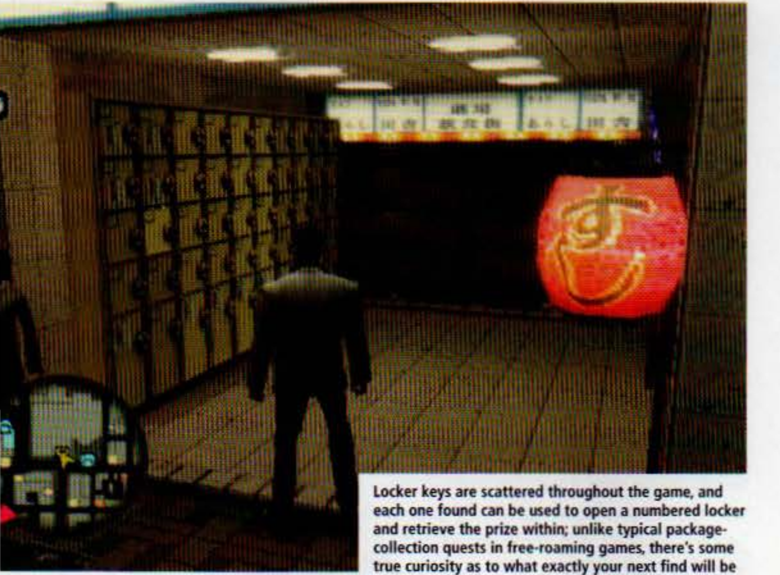
where *Shenmue* stopped being such an unsustainable pipe dream, stopped aiming to become the eighth wonder of the world, and instead had to condense itself into a proper videogame.

It's impossible not to want to root for lead character Kazuma Kiryu. A genuinely handsome and classy lone wolf, the titular Yakuza in a city full of crude scumbags, he's idolised by the game's suavely and meticulously directed cutscenes, which prove to be truly unskippable. He's also a believably willing brawler when the situation demands it, which is very, very often – fights are at *Yakuza*'s core, pushing virtually each story chapter and sub-quest through, while

It's a shame that such scuffles have to climax with a boss confrontation that shifts into frustrating or numb attrition, thanks to the unwieldy camera and lock-on system. Such imprecision can be settled into and dealt with, however, or compensated for by the upgrade system, allowing improvement on three different fronts – Shin ('Heat', or special power, used for vicious finishing moves), Gi (new moves) and Tai (increased HP and dodge skills).

Elsewhere, once the opening chapters have been cleared and a typically dumb and token stealth infiltration of a funeral gathering dealt with, Kazuma is free to explore the fictional Tokyo district of

> Faces get slammed into walls and stomped, and prone bodies have furniture crashed into them in a game with a tremendous eye for gratifying GBH



Locker keys are scattered throughout the game, and each one found can be used to open a numbered locker and retrieve the prize within; unlike typical package-collection quests in free-roaming games, there's some true curiosity as to what exactly your next find will be

producing experience and cash. Combat is brutal and uncomplicated – it thuds, it crunches, it's never harmonious and it'll never be remembered for its grace. Faces get slammed into walls and stomped, and prone bodies have furniture crashed into them in a game with a tremendous eye for gratifying GBH. Arguably one-dimensional, it feels as firmly and instantly rewarding as such a limited system is ever going to get. And for those who persist, *Yakuza* throws in some epic, frantic rumbles, high-adrenaline marathons with ridiculous head counts, boosted by some excellent guitar and saxophone workouts as accompaniment, the kind of funked-up videogame music that rarely exists in such a mature big-budget title.



Kamurocho, a bustling highway of humanity that's dotted with shops and diversions, some functional (food and item outlets) and some inconsequentially amusing. Those streets are barricaded on all sides by walls of gorgeous, busy neon, a striking look that's hardly marred when the game swiftly loads at every street corner, flicking the fixed camera around as it does so. The samples of ambient city chatter, though, loop all too quickly, but not so much as to detract from the distinctive soundtrack. Some solid westernised voice-work makes it through the conversion – it's not as finely polished a translation effort as that of *Dragon Quest VIII*, but it's a definite step forward for imported vocal dubs, featuring some strong







Part of Kazuma's charm is comes from his middle-age, an endless source of teasing from hostile punks that successfully goads the player into dishing out a bone-cracking beating in response. The game provides an endless stream of setups for fistfights, filling its streets with con artists, extortionists and antagonistic hooligans





Connecting to host...

Hostess bars are monstrous, but irresistible, money sinks. Through them, Kazuma can visit a range of willing companions who'll happily giggle and flirt their way through an expensive evening, following each session up with an endearing text message. But it's a minigame that still has high scores firmly in mind: Each girl has her own turn-ons and irritations, and manipulating these can result in the reaping of her affections. Win enough hearts, and she'll fall for Kazuma, ultimately resulting a shy sex 'scene' that makes *God Of War's* QTE nookie look like Deep Throat. But you'd best avoid the hostess bars if you want to save up for that murderous ¥1.5 million sword in the pawn shop, instead of getting an expensive branded handbag thrown back in your face by a girl who gets off on watching you eat fruit all night.

Drunk Man
Hic... You got any Sake on you...? If you do... give it to me!!!

Successfully completing the game unlocks the Premium Box. This brings a collection of unsurprising extras – such as a cutscene digest – along with the ingenious addition of giving players the chance to return to the game without the story in tow, all the better to sniff out all the sub-quests that may have been missed or skipped the first time around



performances along with and a small handful of traditionally dislikeable miscasts. Attention is paid to Japanese pronunciation, but sections of certain scenes fall flat thanks to the poor dialogue timing. And there's another audio aspect that will turn some off – the ludicrous avalanche of swear words that spill from the mouths of Kamurocho's most violent inhabitants, and unavoidably so; Kazuma is regularly accosted during his travels, drawn into myriad on-the-spot fights with little choice. A taxi service helps reduce the quantity for those who just wish to zip around the story, but it can exasperate impatient players as the game progresses.

But for all that Kamurocho is a genuine vice city – adult DVD shops, massage parlours, black market gun rackets and bent gambling houses – its approach to sex is a likeably giggly and inoffensive one (see 'Connecting to host...'), not so much childish as just played for laughs. Like most of *Yakuza's* minigames, with the exception of the battle tournament staged in its subterranean red light district, they're simple but effective button-pushing fun, from UFO catcher machines to the city's baseball batting cage, none-too-demanding downtime that's a welcome shift of focus from the gravity of the narrative.

For some, *Yakuza* will feel dangerously dumb, due to its unrefined and relentless combat, but it's just as dangerous to risk overlooking its capacity to be fiercely capable and loveably playful in plenty of other ways, always aiming to provide captivating entertainment. It's a story-driven game that pays attention to both story and game, a classic Sega-flavoured synergy. It deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as those much-loved but little-bought games upon which Sega built, and indeed lost, its former empire, but doesn't deserve to join them in such a premature afterlife. **[8]**



The enormous arsenal of impromptu props and weapons available for combat goes as far as including guns and grenades, but there's no great subtlety, or skill, to their use. An enemy with a handgun, however, can become a henpecking nuisance during a heavily populated battle



EVERY EXTEND EXTRA

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,800 (£22) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), SEPTEMBER 30 (US), OCTOBER 27 (UK) PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: Q ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E156, E164

Cut to the quick



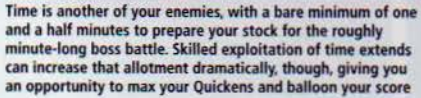
There's a devilishly intelligent method to the Quicken power-up's madness. Extending your Quicken meter not only shifts up the rhythm of the game, but increases both the number and size of enemy formations washing across your field, giving you greater opportunity to unleash blinding massive chains, thus inflating your score and stock.

But, to add just one more task to the game's simultaneous strategic demands, Quicken-carrying objects stop entering your view after you've collected six, meaning to reach the ideal eight, you have to detonate but not collect the final three until they all reside on the field. It's a tall order when concurrently focusing on ducking, weaving, and striking, but an essential one for conquering later levels.

What lurks at the heart of *Every Extend* is a dynamic that's as challenging to convey as it is for the uninitiated to overcome. It's not simply about the stop-start waltzes scraping through the slimmest bullet-hell cracks, though that's certainly a good portion of it. And though the precis provided by Omega when he created his original freeware hit – "Suicidal explosion game with new feelings. Blow up self to involve enemies!" – hints at wanton and indiscriminate attacks, that's actually the rookie's trap. Instead, the key to success in *Every Extend* isn't so much basic restraint as classic Freudian retentiveness.

It's not immediately apparent and, in fact, is probably the last key to turn on your way to true mastery. But when you've excruciatingly held your position for what seems like hours, with the clock winding dangerously down, your charged-blast vibrating magnet-coil tight and threatening to self-destruct, and with pixel-precise timing detonate your charge, sending a searing white-hot chain-reaction blast across all 16:9 of your widescreen view: that moment of release is when you realise what *Every Extend* is about.

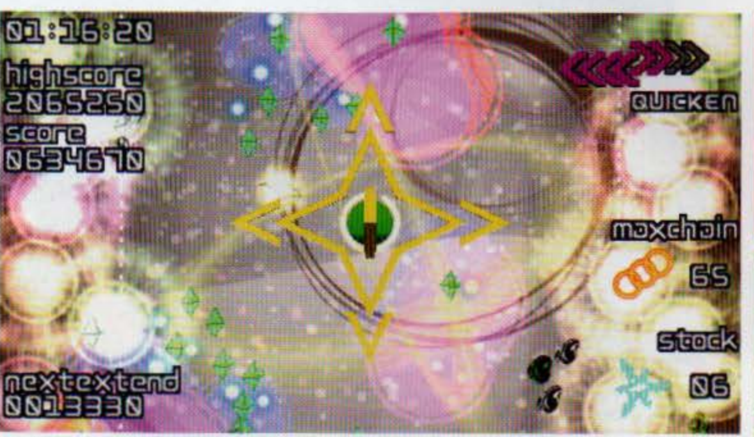
Its expend-lives-to-gain-lives conceit is classic risk and reward typified, and if you've played Omega's original, you likely know it well. But the question here is how much extra that *Extra* represents, and the answer is twofold. Mechanically, Q has smartly balanced two key upgrades – a charged blast with a radius that grows with time, and a smartbomb, allowing you to pre-plan an attack and move to safety before detonating – with the cost of halved speed, making even more precarious its simultaneous game of stick and move.



Time is another of your enemies, with a bare minimum of one and a half minutes to prepare your stock for the roughly minute-long boss battle. Skilled exploitation of time extends can increase that allotment dramatically, though, giving you an opportunity to max your Quickens and balloon your score

The other, Q's by now characteristic audiovisual extra, is the more readily appreciable one. Less integral than *Rez*'s evolving polygonal profundity, the skins applied to each stage of *Every Extend* are not even so much about creating or supporting a rhythm – the flow of enemies too random compared to the metronomic sweep of *Lumines*' block grid – but in evoking a specific theme or emotion, be it Sakura Drive's cherry-pink fluttering or Nostalgic Drive's hazy carousel and baby-rattle memories turned drunken night-terrors. Its up-tempo integration hits with all the fury of its incendiary blasts where it matters the most: when the 33¹/₃ rhythm ratchets up to 45 in a properly Quickened level (see 'Cut to the quick'), and your heart races to beat-match the game's new target BPM.

For a game that can't properly call itself shooter, puzzle or rhythm, its defiant obscurity and the resulting barrier to entry are its greatest hindrances. It demands persistence on the part of the player to uncover its inner workings, but when you do start to move in tandem, it's an undeniably exhilarating dance. **[8]**



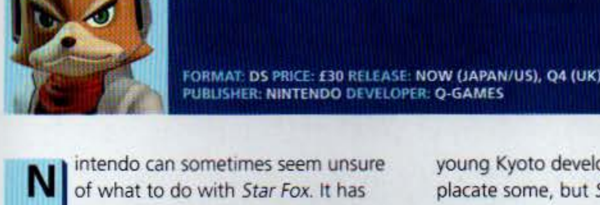
The swirling liquid-light coloured maelstrom of destruction is the reward for your premeditated risk, as well as the more basic monetary one of a dramatic increase in score 'extending' your stock of UCHU bombs







There's plenty of dialogue used for explaining the game mechanics and exposing romantic intrigue, and the characters – which are hand-illustrated and talking in garbled samples once more – are as appealing as they have ever been. There's even a cute function that lets you sample your own voice for their speech that works very well, pitching it up or down to fit the character



STAR FOX COMMAND

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN/US), Q4 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: Q-GAMES

Nintendo can sometimes seem unsure of what to do with *Star Fox*. It has spent the best part of a decade ignoring the simple, robust formula that won the first two on-rails blasters so many fans, instead pushing Fox McCloud and pals from genre to genre with a long thirdparty stick. After platform adventuring and arena shooting, after Rare and Namco, comes this succinct strategy-shooter hybrid on DS from young Kyoto developer Q-Games. It may not placate some, but *Star Fox Command* has the heritage (with members of the Argonaut and Nintendo teams that worked on the original involved) and it's a good deal more faithful and focused than the last two games to wear the name.

Unlike Rare, Q hasn't had to shoehorn *Star Fox* characters into an ill-suited universe; instead it has entertainingly fleshed out the mythos with a huge range of playable characters (from Peppy Hare's daughter to Andross' grandson) and a soapy plot. Unlike Namco, it has kept the action airborne (or spaceborne), and replicated that all-important *Star Fox* structure: this is a very short game from start to initial end, but there are multiple paths through it and that ending is one of nine. True, those paths are crudely implemented unlocks rather than a seamless part of the flow of the game, but the replay value is still tremendous.

The turn-based strategy that frames each stage – with flightplans for up to four fighters drawn directly onto the touchscreen in order to collect power-ups and intercept enemies headed for the Great Fox carrier – is simple, but pleasingly direct, and the design of the miniature maps is tight as a drum. Enemy encounters and base raids take the form of target-elimination dogfights in a small open arena, and they're very brief, but kept lively by imaginative enemy design and scattered supplementary targets. Every control but fire is mapped, with elegant economy, to taps, sweeps and scribbles of the stylus: the travel is rather long for fast manoeuvres, but the ships move with fluid grace, and the dual use of the touchscreen for control and radar becomes only occasionally problematic.

Essentially two games in miniature bolted together, on the face of it *Star Fox Command* shouldn't add up to more than the sum of its microcosmic parts, but they're bound together by such a taut and ingenious web of rules and restrictions that they hum with harmony. Base captures earn turns, spare turns earn lives, and each stage has a harsh time counter that must continuously be extended by squeezing in additional hits and deflecting fire with barrel-rolls. It's a surprisingly involved and involving schema, with all the poise (if not the innate clarity) you'd expect from an in-house Nintendo title. Ultimately the tiny, intricate design just doesn't give *Command* enough elbow room to develop true depth or challenge, but it's thoroughly satisfying all the same, and a worthy side-show to the *Star Fox* circus. **[7]**



Star Fox's traditionally clean, angular and abstract look actually benefits from the back-to-basics approach enforced by the DS' low poly count. It's a shame the draw distance isn't better though, with enemies fading out at relatively close range and having to be tracked by radar



Precise and gratifying audiovisual feedback was a strength of the first two *Star Fox* games, and *Command* proudly upholds those values. It goes one further by acknowledging the series' pioneering role in rumble by supporting *Metroid Hunters'* DS rumble pack





Star Fox is more an extended family than a team, and each member has their own sharp, charismatic ship. The craft have varying capabilities in terms of shield, boost, firepower, lock-on and capacity for drag-and-drop bombs

All rage mode



***Star Fox Command*'s multiplayer is a simple dogfight between eight players over a wireless connection or four players online. The mischievous twist is that it's not kills that count but the power cores left behind afterwards, which can easily be nabbed by a rival. Eight players provide a hectic ruck but even four are spread pretty thin, and there is obviously little scope for variation in the map design, with a cloaking device the only notable power-up. As popular as *Mario Kart*, *Metroid* and *Animal Crossing* are, Nintendo's wifi service needs a fresh hit, but *Command* won't be it.**



SAINTS ROW

FORMAT: 360 **PRICE:** £50 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ **DEVELOPER:** VOLITION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

New Tack City?



The problem with adding multiplayer support to a game like *GTA* is that few of its proponents really know why they want it, and even fewer know quite how it should be done. *Saints Row* takes its shot with both Xbox Live and System Link support, but its near-sighted aim and prohibitive technology have created little beyond the classic thirdperson modes. Big Ass Chains nudges the deathmatch format in one direction, the goal being to cash in the bling that dead players leave behind; Protect The Pimp nudges it in another, with a randomly chosen player becoming an escort objective for their teammates. Blinged Out Ride acknowledges the genre's potential, at least, with a team game that couples on-foot and vehicular play.

The efforts of Red Faction developer Volition to bring something approaching life to the unashamedly cynical *Saints Row* are commendable, and unexpectedly evident. As befits a distant relative of Parallax Software and *Descent*, it's a technically confident trespasser on *GTA4*'s provisional territory, bringing some decidedly next-gen qualities to the genre as well as some minor, but genuinely valuable, innovations. But while Rockstar made its millions capturing the grotesque allure of fantasy crime, every character in this me-too endeavour is simply grotesque. It has a taste for hot coffee, but only knows how to serve it straight.

In acting out a story that requires no introduction (or deserves much description), it makes plenty of clever-clogs tweaks that enhance the *GTA* formula and plenty that miss the point, often gearing the game towards those without patience, attentiveness, or the love of a challenge. GPS makes navigation a breeze, its ambiguous signposting the only real blunder, but the achievement itself is one of efficiency at the expense of charm. Remember *GTA*'s process of learning the streets, noting the landmarks and essentially earning your citizenship? *Saints Row* has nothing of the sort.



While it may have seemed an obvious *GTA* upgrade, the ability to craft your own (mute) hero is further testament to *Saints Row*'s limited understanding of *GTA*'s spark, and also of its insecurity when dealing with all forms of characterisation

And neither would it have were the GPS removed, because Stilwater's a dreary old hole – a pared down shadow of Liberty City without colour or heart. Its airwaves are full of ghastly *GTA* imitators, never more excruciating than when aping its spoken word skits and faux commercials, completely overlooking the smartness of their inspiration. These evil streets never play host to wryly referential filmic set-pieces, nor do such moments emerge from your random encounters with police and gangsters. Because their real estate value is so low, their properties and consumables so unattractive, there's no sense of ownership and little incentive to protect either yourself or the possessions you've acquired. Instead, there's just the old-fashioned desire to survive a mission without having to repeat it.



Purchasing from the game's agonisingly titled fast food menu doesn't yield bonuses so much as a desire to have the acts so eloquently punned turned upon their author

Yet as part of that bank-breaking debt to Rockstar, life in this urban vacuum is made bearable, and often enjoyable, by the sheer vigour of the *GTA* machine. Powering Hollywoodised cars (the game's reduced scope leaving no room for air travel) around corners and through obstacles still carries an innate videogame buzz, and if Volition has done one thing absolutely right it's to leave this network of systems relatively intact. Or, to put it another way, copy it wholesale. Strip away any instinctive resentment of *Saints Row*'s stunted vocabulary and it's a perfectly adequate rip-off, which is something something no imitator has achieved before. For those looking for a stopgap between two *GTA* generations – ideally those of exceptionally forgiving palates – it's just the junk food they've been hoping for. **[6]**



This game doesn't just treat women like objects, it treats them like objects you'd have trouble shifting from a toilet bowl. Highlighting terms like pimp and ho as if they were marks of rank, it's a nasty exercise in antisocial baiting



GTR2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: SIMBIN

Smashing over the raised curbs and grounding the chassis won't necessarily result in a crash now, though the harsher sawtooth constructions still demand considerable respect – as does the shiny paint

The original *GTR* stood out as an incredibly faithful simulation, entrancing despite a totally unforgiving approach to grip. This sequel softens the challenge with a far more accepting – yet, make no mistake, far more realistic – attitude to excessive behaviour. Yet it's still more intense.

Drivers of *GTR2*'s Lamborghinis, Maseratis and Porsches (to name a few) can breathe a sigh of relief that some grip now lingers once the rear tyres start spinning, whereas before all hope would be lost. This means braking wildly late, hitting those fanatically-modelled 3D curbs and generally flicking the car too hard are now options, should you need them. They may not be the way to the ultimate lap time, but they're often the way past an opponent in a race.

This game conveys an unrivalled sense of mass versus the machine's attempts to change its course, and allied to the already highly impressive handling this new freedom to overstep the mark (and, if you're either good or lucky, come back from it) adds a welcome human edge. After all, racing, like music or any other endeavour, is about people as much as machines – something F1 has forgotten with tragic effect. If the original game demanded the ultra-controlled, metronomic beat of German techno, *GTR2* is the loose intensity of Nirvana.

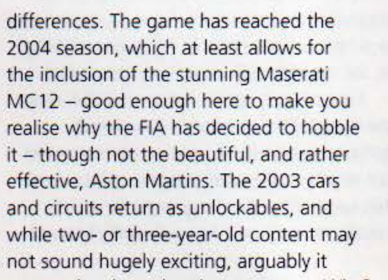
The real difference, then, is the ability to fight for victory with a hotter head. Yet obviously there are other more tangible differences. The game has reached the 2004 season, which at least allows for the inclusion of the stunning Maserati MC12 – good enough here to make you realise why the FIA has decided to hobble it – though not the beautiful, and rather effective, Aston Martins. The 2003 cars and circuits return as unlockables, and while two- or three-year-old content may not sound hugely exciting, arguably it matters less here than in most cases. Why? Simply because the real series will be familiar to just a handful of cable-viewing diehards in the first place.

While the expected array of stability, traction and anti-lock aids feature to help beginners, a more active role is played by the new driving school. This covers everything from the basics to full laps of each track, breaking things down into sections in between. With a visible race line (colour coded to indicate brake and throttle pressures) and a ghost car to chase, these tests are both illuminating and addictively challenging. Just about everything outside these set challenges is scaleable, adjustable or customisable through the improved interface, including race length, car types, the day/night cycle, weather and the online rules. The only thing that's hard to adjust, in fact, is the tension in your muscles. *GTR2* is hugely better than its predecessor in exactly the area that matters. **[9]**



Racing grids are again huge, though can easily be scaled to give your system an easier ride. Online races have a ceiling of 28 cars, and dealing with this many opponents – especially with other classes on track – is something of an art in itself.





Those after a particular challenge, or perhaps just yearning to create an entirely new way of swearing, can try night races in the rain. Even against these odds, mistakes mean cursing your own failures rather than the game's

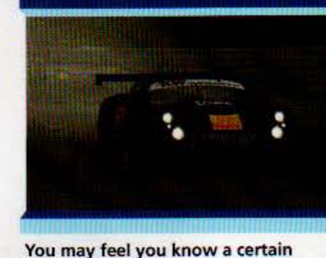






Speeding up time so that the newly implemented sun sets leads to problems running from glare to darkness. It's worth knowing where the headlight button is

Good night



You may feel you know a certain track like the back of your hand, and there's one very quick way to tell – race it at night. Players can now either set off during darkness or, for an extra challenge, start in daylight with an accelerated (up to 60x) cycle. A setting and rising sun, visual references evaporating in vast unlit patches and potentially broken headlights test the steadiest hands.





Some of the most refreshing moments arise from non-Star Wars related incidents: the joy experienced when making Yoda a tractor driver being an excellent example









It's the little moments that help the game maintain its lightness of touch. An Indiana Jones hat (above) can be swapped for Princess Leia's hair buns or a stylish topper. In later levels these seemingly trivial diversions are welcome relief for the repetitiveness of gameplay tasks

LEGO STAR WARS II: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) GBA, DS, GC, PC, PS2, PSP
PRICE: £40 (360) £35 (PC) £30 (OTHERS) RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 11
PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES PREVIOUSLY IN: E161

Return, Return, Return of the Jedi



One feature of the original *Lego Star Wars* divided opinion more than any other: immortality. The concept returns here, with characters respawning seconds after their dismantled Lego limbs have been scattered across the screen. Cynics are bound to cite eternal life as the game's defining weakness, but it's this element that encourages imaginative play and experimentation. It also means that in co-op you can hack off other players' heads without too much fear of comeback.

As carefree as it is exuberant, *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy* is an intergalactic adventure playground of a game. There's no hour-long learning curve here, no complicated string of button-mashing combos to master, no HUD or RPG menu to laboriously maintain. This is play, pure and simple. You'll bound into action at your own pace, encouraged to creatively explore a galaxy far, far away within the strict realms of the Lucas/Lego-defined universe. *Lego Star Wars II* reminds us that while the sandbox might be the biggest toy in the videogame park, it certainly has no long-term monopoly on fun.

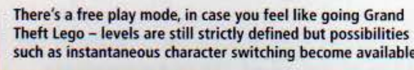
Building – no pun intended – on the unexpected success of last year's *Lego Star Wars*, *Lego Star Wars II* takes you back (forward) to those halcyon days before CGI arrived in the Empire. You know the story and the game understands that, preferring not to patronise by restating narratives.

Controls soon become second-nature. Moves are mostly simple double jumps, though some are obviously character-based. Almost all gameplay tasks are gentle puzzles, for which a rudimentary knowledge of the original films won't hurt. Combat is restricted to simple auto-aim firing, lightsaber-rattling or, for the Jedi, using the legendary Force.

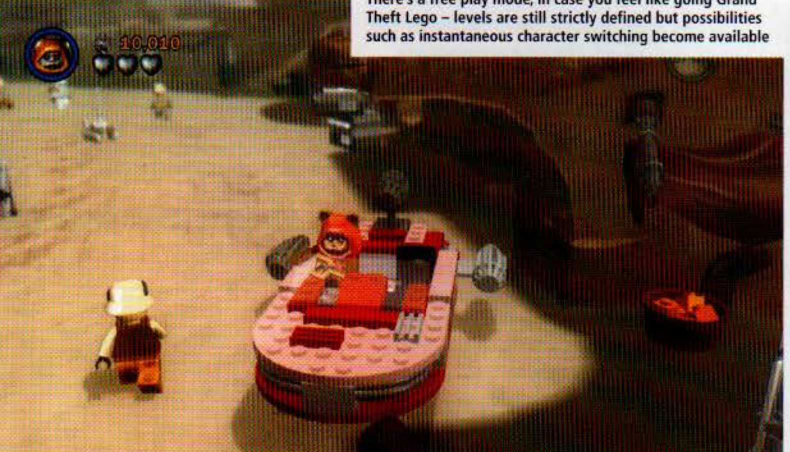
Everything is unabashedly cheerful: even the dreaded Emperor exudes an air of politeness beneath his gnarly, ancient scowl. But where you'd usually expect this to wear thin *Lego Star Wars II* manages to sustain joviality throughout. Tiny yet well-observed details lend the otherwise cartoon-y action a sense of real symbiosis with the original source. So Han Solo's incredibly cheesy grin or Leia's powerful hand slaps actually sum up their filmic characters' idiosyncrasies to an amazing degree. That these things work without becoming overbearing is testament to the sheer level of inventiveness reverberating throughout the whole game.

The 360 version is obviously the showroom build of this release: all smooth HD lines and perfectly rendered reflections. Thankfully, the game remains a consummate cross-platform performer. Whatever the hardware, the experience of Vader-ing around the galaxy destroying various Lego constructions will be just as engaging. But sadly, it's by no means a perfect experience. Using droids is far more exhausting than necessary and almost all starship sequences are noticeably overlong. It's also a shame that later levels begin to run out of steam, repeating tasks over and over as a contrivance for lengthening narrative.

Still, *Lego Star Wars II* supplies just the right mix of smart originality and blockbuster nostalgia to keep players coming back. And, as ever, that nostalgia is a big part of what fuels an adult enthusiasm for the series. The gameplay may be exhaustively tuned for children, but for grown-ups – and for these Episodes especially – there's little to beat the allure of finally getting to see what a Lego Ewok looks like in motion. And then getting to smash it, for a blissful, temporary moment, into a handful of plastic shrapnel. **[7]**



There's a free play mode, in case you feel like going Grand Theft Lego – levels are still strictly defined but possibilities such as instantaneous character switching become available









BULLET WITCH

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥7,149 (£33)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (US/UK)
PUBLISHER: AQ INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: CAVIA

Bar keep



There are no pickups in *Bullet Witch*, no globs of health to be grabbed or ammo clips to be gathered – everything is handled via combat. Both health and magic bars recharge quickly, but taking damage or casting strong spells reduces the maximum to which they can refill. Your max health will return to normal with time, while your magic limit can only be restored by gunning down enemies, greatly limiting your ability to rely on the strongest natural disaster spells available. Alicia also has access to infinite ammo, conjuring a fresh clip out of thin air in exchange for a little magic.

Bullet Witch's opening stage paints the game as a stylish but dim thirdperson shooter. It's a sour introduction, a half-hour journey that's caught between the need to ease the player in and the fact that each level – of which there are only six – is huge. It means the game is blessed with some expansive landscapes, but cursed with the kind of emptiness that's quick to bore those players that lose their way. Those first impressions aren't entirely bogus either, as it turns out to be a game that often lapses into monotone run'n'gun blasting, albeit backed up by some powerful magic spells that are realised through gratuitous displays of physics.

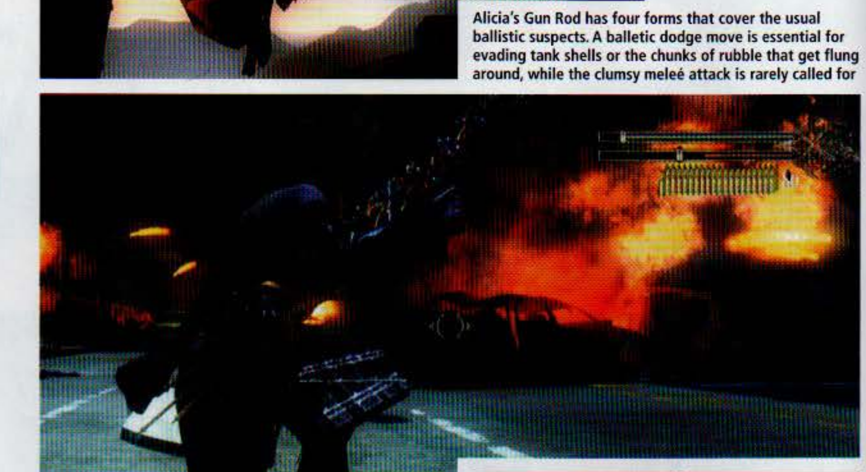
But there's more, of course. The one-note enemies of the opening stage soon expand into a *Halo*-style family of enemy types, a collection of well-armed military cadavers – with the twitchy, teleporting fighter jet pilots a notable highlight – that appear over and over in slightly different combinations. Other, more remarkable enemies also make an occasional appearance, such as the towering 'Giga' soldiers or the hellish and disturbing possessed humans that flail and sprint about in a fast-motion horror, gabbling and gurgling dementedly. Largely, though, it's a sequence of battles with ream after ream of gunners, a rhythm that can lapse into dullness, but one that presents some moderately flexible opportunities for exploiting Alicia's magic skills.

These nine skills vary from the persistently useful – a conjured barrier, or the excellent smokescreen of Raven Panic – to those whose function has to be learned well – such as Rose Thorns, a small patch of spikes that bursts from the ground a fixed distance away from Alicia – through to full-on natural disasters – meteors, tornados and thunder. Much like Alicia's flourish-filled animations, magic is as much about flair as function, but it ultimately doesn't feel comfortably woven into the action, only offering so much before the player is forced to revert to shooting. And many of those battles can feel sluggish, a fact rammed home by some widely-spaced checkpoints; minus the magic system and its inventive characters, it's a typically troubled thirdperson shooter, with enemies that kill through firepower instead of intelligence, textures that are prone to some heavy flickering and the nagging sense of repetition.

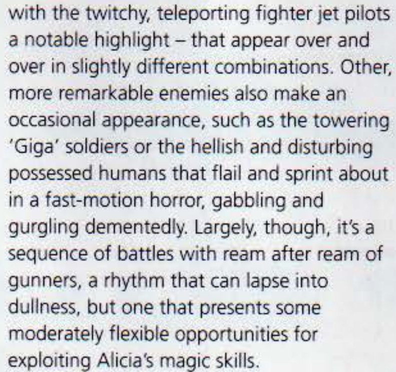
It's a game that has enough vision to place you in a battle with a gargantuan sky dragon while stood atop a swooping passenger jet that's breaking cloud cover in front of a gorgeous full moon, but not enough to turn it into anything more than an unexceptional boss tussle. It adds up to an odd experience: a fractured action outing whose story revolves around few locations and few boss fights, relying on the gratification of some bewitching effects to brighten up its dry and slender core of gunplay. It's an enjoyably twisted and often satisfying piece of fantasy, then, even though the reality of its more generic aspects poses a serious threat to its achievements. **[6]**



Some levels are partitioned by spirit walls, removed by destroying hovering brains. These defend themselves by sucking up nearby junk and flinging it directly at Alicia



Alicia's Gun Rod has four forms that cover the usual ballistic suspects. A balletic dodge move is essential for evading tank shells or the chunks of rubble that get flung around, while the clumsy meleé attack is rarely called for



Despite its fantasy tone and characters, *Bullet Witch*'s locations have their feet firmly on the ground. The ghostly-silver skyscrapers of the city make for a strikingly moody setting, but there are other areas that feel dreary







The Sacrifice spell allows Alicia to give health to injured NPCs, a gesture rewarded in the end of stage rank. As well as a leaderboard, costumes and 'Concept Missions' can be downloaded from Live, but neither were available at launch





They'll bring cosmetic change and minor stat modifications, but the utility of some costumes is limited outside specific tasks, meaning only the most dedicated will see the full technique range of each

CONTACT

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£16) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), OCTOBER (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E161, E166

Of all the sly subversions that the Grasshopper imprint has left on *Contact* – its fourth-wall breakage that leaves the player lending a third world to the game's naturalistic and pixel-abstracted pair – perhaps the most apparent is the feeling that this is an MMO that's neither genuinely massive, genuinely multiplayer nor genuinely online, and a dungeon hack that rarely smacks of dank must and torch-smoke.

By reducing combat to its most basic form, in this case pressing a button to enter combat mode and taking a back seat to the ensuing scrabble save for the occasional 'technique' attack or to refuel with a quick snack – normally an MMO's net-code necessity – Grasshopper took a risk on removing the player from the essential world interaction most RPGs allow. Happily, though, in the context of *Contact*'s exploration, where the driving motivation isn't to build an ultimate warrior but instead simply to follow the game's looping curveball storyline, that simplicity adds a leisurely pacing to its action, shifting even the most tedious leveling from menu-laden drudgery to pick-up and punch pastime.

That simplicity does come at a certain cost, though. With an overwhelming array of weaponry, your character's wardrobe of interchangeable costumes and a laundry list of upgraded techniques that can be acquired by repetitive use of each, there's many possible paths your character can traverse throughout the adventure. But where these options are a boon to MMO players looking for new ways to continually express themselves in an open-ended world, within the confines of *Contact*'s linear storyline – especially since low-level brute force is both the path of least resistance and a viable option – it does leave huge swathes of potential unexplored and specialisation largely unrewarded.

But that might end up being its greatest accidental asset: the tantalising number of open menu slots upon game completion – raw foods never collected and recipes never concocted, weapons never found and their accompanying higher-level skills never learned – drives an innate collector's desire to continue to run rampant through *Contact*'s world, effortlessly hurdling the classic RPG pitfall of bringing the player back after the credits roll, and it's something game seems ready to accommodate with earlier explored islands refreshing with new inhabitants and quests after advancing the main storyline.

What it lacks in tactical depth, though, it returns doubly so in its offbeat charm whether through the crackpot mutterings of its cast of characters or its increasingly non-traditional modern-day island locales. It may not be a new blueprint for the RPG, but Contact still knows how to touch you. **[7]**

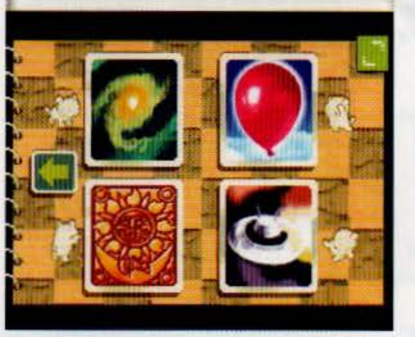




Habara Island, a play on Tokyo's central gaming district and famous otaku paradise, is by far the game's crowning achievement both in concentrated number of geek references and its most inspired level and enemy design







Peel-and-stick decals bring the requisite DS touchscreen use to *Contact*, and come into play in two ways. First is this static helper set, which can return you to your home base or summon space-pup Mochi for an attack, but there's also a randomly collected set of status-upgrade stickers which can be swapped in and out of four slots to further customise your character



Cooking is one of the game's most addictive side-quests, second only to – as usual – fishing, with creative combinations leading to interesting results, and hidden recipe cards spelling out the necessary ingredients for its more exotic and empowering dishes

Isla de Encounter



Always the most obscured feature during the game's development, the wifi mode has turned out to be more furtive glance than full-on contact. By adding each other to their respective friends lists, players can connect to each other online just long enough to exchange some simple data before being disconnected again.

From there, a trip to the newly-opened WiFisland reveals an expansive resort home where some careful exploration will uncover your guest-starring friend occupying a newly-renovated bedroom. Stopping by for a chat grants you a status bonus as well as some revealing generated text: a cute, if underdeveloped, way to further break down the game's fourth wall, though it does have the haunting feel of being the last vestige of wider, since discarded online multiplayer plans.



GANGS OF LONDON

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: LONDON STUDIO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



Though suspension of disbelief remains at the centre of so much of gaming, when things just don't add up it can niggle away at your desire to persevere – especially when you're just not having fun. There are missions in *Gangs Of London*, for example, in which, armed with only a knife, you must kill opposing gang members who carry guns – guns which disappear along with the fallen corpses, restricting you to continue wrestling with the miserably inept hand-to-hand combat mechanics, forever thinking: 'If only I could somehow make use of this powerful weaponry falling all around me. If only it didn't just magically disappear'.

Assistance would be at hand from your fellow gang members if they accurately followed the simple commands you're able to throw their way, but the AI frequently snags itself on the environments, and eventually you simply abandon this supposedly strategic element. Tellingly, once it's retired, you never miss it.

Gangs Of London handles some of the more obvious aspects of the free-roaming run-and-gun genre more sure-footedly. The driving sections work. The banal stealth elements will press the buttons of those who get kicks out of banal stealth elements, and aiming your gun in the sections in which you're actually allowed to use one isn't the disaster you'd expect having suffered the meleé combat.



The game is at its best when you're hammering around the streets. Unfortunately it's not long before the game settles into a familiar groove. There's none of the *GTA* series' spark here

But then you slide back into shadier territory. There's not enough variety in the mission types, with too many driving tasks amounting to getting from A to B while evading a handful of opposition cars en route, and too many on-foot sequences stacking up as little more than challenge-free shooting galleries. The dialogue is belief-defyingly bad, the characters who deliver it lazy, one-dimensional caricatures. The character-development system, which theoretically nurtures your gang members as you progress, doesn't appear to contribute anything of note.

London Studio has stuffed the package with extras, including a turn-based Gang Battle mode, pub games, and a number of challenge modes based on the central gameplay model. Surely the time spent building such peripheral frills would have been better spent addressing the jarring failings of the game proper. **[3]**



You can strafe and lock-on to targets during shootouts, but gunplay only looks refined when compared to the dreadful hand-to-hand combat. Stealth sections, meanwhile, just about tick boxes



B-BOY

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £30 (PS2) £35 (PSP)
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 8 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: FREESTYLE GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E165

Although *B-Boy's* heart is in the right place, a few hours of play reveals that neither you nor it essentially understands where that's supposed to be. The central conceit, a hip-hop oriented game with no appetite for violence, sex or crime, is refreshing. But what should have turned out a far more dynamic experience, however, is hampered by serious flaws in game design.

Each dance-off is a beat 'em up style contest fought against a string of real life breakdancers. At each 'throwdown' are a number of medals awarded on completion of dancing tasks. Medals allow you to unlock moves, creating a growing 'movebook' of combos to use in dancing battles.

Controls initially mystify but they soon become intuitive. The four basic moves (Toprock, Freeze, Windmill, Sixstep) dictate the various combos available, and transitions are performed by stringing these together, either through scheduling or instantaneously. Reaction tests upgrade your homeboy status if done well, while keeping rhythm with the shoulder buttons lengthens moves and helps gain medals. The turn-based throwdowns provide an average of 45 seconds in which to lay down your freshest moves.

Despite its garish interface, *B-boy* is a beautiful game. Skillful use of motion-capture technology allows the kind of physical body flow many fighting games can only dream of, and arenas have a colourfully retro appeal befitting the game's wonderful soundtrack. Rather wisely, Freestyle has chosen intelligent leftfield tunes, eschewing obvious fare to favour tracks spanning everything from The Jackson Five to the Black Eyed Peas.

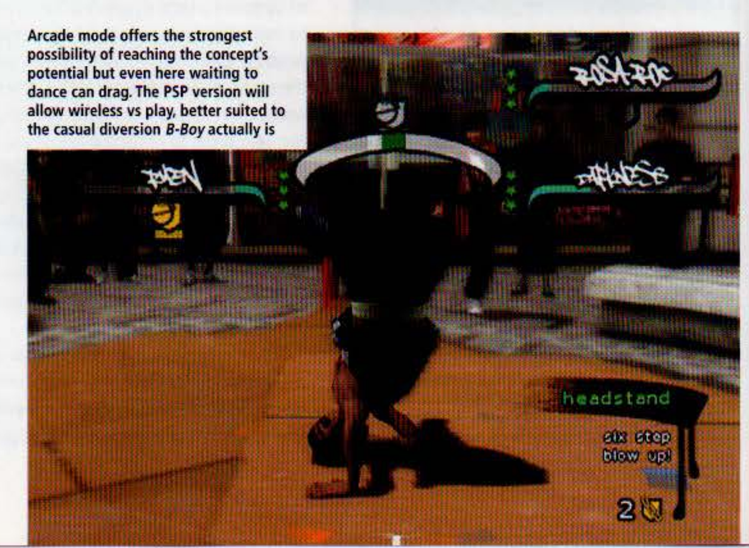


Interface and menu issues make the career mode far more laborious than needs be. This gaudy orange inbox isn't just hard on the eyes, it's also difficult to navigate and counter-intuitive

But where *B-Boy* crucially disappoints is in the execution of its gameplay. The turn-based nature of stages is interminably frustrating: when CPU characters perform you often feel an uncontrollable urge to give them a good kicking. Not only is the control system easily exploitable (hitting R1 and L1 fast enough ensures a win in rhythm challenges) but a badly thought through combat scheme always favours the b-boy up last.

There's enjoyment to be had, not lease because the fast, free-flowing animation is genuinely astounding. But that satisfaction is overwhelmingly visual: both the challenge of and the feedback from stringing together combos just isn't strong enough to lift the game above an idle diversion. And, for a title that has dared to compare itself to everything from *Tekken* to the *Tony Hawk* series, that just isn't enough to see it through. **[4]**

Arcade mode offers the strongest possibility of reaching the concept's potential but even here waiting to dance can drag. The PSP version will allow wireless vs play, better suited to the casual diversion *B-Boy* actually is







RHYTHM TENGOKU

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: ¥3,800 (£17) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Adding to the already nerve-wracking pressure, your partners in rhythm each have their ways of measuring your success, often with thinly-veiled and hilariously expressive sideways glances as you make a shambles of their rehearsed routines

Were it any other game, leading off by highlighting its one-note gameplay might be a damning indictment. But in this case, its singular note – often little more than a steady tap of the A button – isn't just the game's DNA but also its contagion, an immediately infectious central force whose symptoms emerge when you instinctively tap your toes to the title theme.

By now rhythm gaming is likely second nature to most, with its genetic code co-opted as a side-game into a host of unlikely cross-genre titles and its subtleties plumbed by a decade's worth of Parappa imitators and expansionists. But, as might be expected from the *Wario Ware* team – already Nintendo's most modestly rebellious group, and here instantly recognisable by their audio asides and grab-bag of graphic designs – *Tengoku*'s brand of rhythm subverts the Simon Says standards and frees it from the tyranny of staves, bars and abstract dots. Instead, its 40-odd minigames have been transformed into a tense minute-long tightrope walk toward perfect performances: plucking hairs from turnip chins, hunting ghosts, tap-dancing with simian vaudevillians and rat-racing across a kitchen table while avoiding a mindful cat, all set to a diverse range of hip-hop and feudal era beats.

Initially, it's this refusal to play by genre rules that lends the game an exceptional challenge, one greatly enhanced by the team's constant lobbing of graphical distractions and sly beat-witchery, gently shoving you further away from visual cues and instead requiring you to feel the rhythm. But in the end it is precisely this playful underpinning – digging for each game's particular groove and celebrating the end of each stage with a shuffle-function mash-up of previous levels cut in and out of an original composition – that gives it an undeniably rewarding joyful energy every bit as driving as its metronomic tempo.



Taking a tip from others in Nintendo's recent stable, your progress is charted not just through unlocks but by an overall score after each level, or by accessing a rhythm check machine which measures and prints out a guide to your accuracy

Though necessarily lighter in its volume than *Wario Ware*, with experienced beat-matchers easily wending their way through its initial stock of six stages over a weekend's session, the path to true perfection is a more perilous undertaking requiring repeat play, and a familiar set of toys and full-kit drum lessons provide ample backup diversion. More importantly though, it's the most refreshing take on rhythm in recent memory and could easily be one of the last Game Boy greats. **[7]**



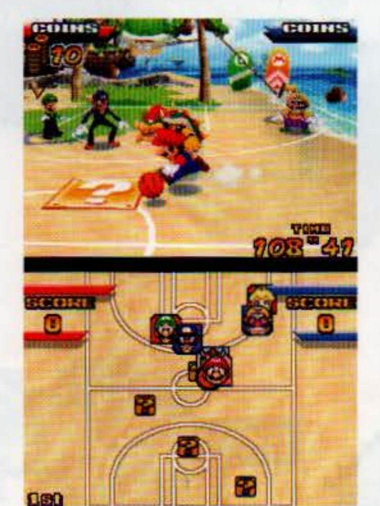
MARIO HOOPS 3-ON-3

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£22) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), SEPTEMBER 11 (US), OCTOBER 11 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX

A dedicated Mario basketball game seems long overdue, and not just because of the endless moonlighting that the franchise has been indulging in. Of the biggest US sports that make regular videogame appearances, basketball seems the easiest to subvert – the most capable of benefiting from a step away from simulation towards more exaggerated arcade action, even if it's rarely able to shrug off a complex control system. Which is exactly where *Mario Hoops 3-On-3* sits.

The lower screen provides both guidance and control, displaying a map of the court, but also used for stylus inputs over a wide range of contexts, handled with straight-line strokes and taps. While attacking, passes, directional dribbles, dodges, dashes and a variety of shots and slam dunks are offered, along with a super-move activated by quickly rapping out a sequence of dots – the five points of Mario's M or Wario's W, or the vertices of a triangle. When on defence, blocks and tackles are available and, overall, the D-pad controls character movement and the L button cycles between teammates.

It's a handful, for sure, both logistically and literally – the hand operating the D-pad and L button needs to hold on tight to enable the screen-wide strokes that stylus



Alongside the familiar faces, the game can't resist scattering bits of Nintendo everywhere – one court sits next to a factory line of Bob-ombs. *Final Fantasy* characters are also unlockable



Super Mario Kart's weapon set sprouts from the floor whenever one of the defence runs over a coin pad. It produces familiar emotions, and a red shell is a potent lifesaver during a dire moment

movements demand, a familiar recipe for fatigued hands for those unable to get to grips with *Metroid Prime: Hunters*. It feels like a system that's been refined and laboured over, and one that ultimately becomes natural but doesn't flow well – those lengthy strokes feeling as much a matter of persistence as precision.

The scoring system, however, is excellent. Nailing a basket earns 20 points, but any coins collected along the way – from dribbling over coin pads, executing special slam dunks or soaking up the spills from tackled opponents – are added to that base score, a welcome modification to a traditional format that stops play from becoming a bitter and relentless to-and-fro between endzones.

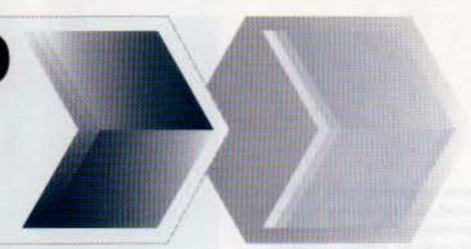
Versus mode makes the multiplayer transition well – ad hoc for up to four, but not online – with the messiness of human versus play drowning out some of the frustration that seeps into the control scheme. But the solo experience begins to strain when the inevitable challenge of later cups is reached and the apathy of CPU teammates is brought to the fore. It adds up to a Mario sports title that appeals beyond its ready-installed fanbase – strong, clean visuals and animation certainly help – but one that might not entrance them long enough to turn into major league love. **[7]**



TIME EXTEND

GUARDIAN HEROES

FORMAT: **SATURN**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **TREASURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1996**



Treasure's riotous game beat up the beat 'em up – but lived to tell the tale of an abandoned genre

Scrolling beat 'em ups are one of gaming's longest-serving genres – not yet in retirement but teetering on the pensionable as each blundering *Final Fight: Streetwise* turns up to undo the good work of an *Urban Reign*. One-on-one scrappers have settled down into a stable domestic relationship with gamers, but the dedicated scrolling beat 'em up remains truly marginalised. The art of one-on-many thumping has moved on: absorbed into myriad action games, it's always the bridesmaid and never the bride. It features in many games but stars in few, long divorced from the arcades where it once achieved a blissful, balanced existence, able to wow the punters with instant, tap-tap-tap combo gratification while siphoning the credits out of their pockets with cruel boss scraps.

As singleplayer experiences, side-scrolling beat 'em ups were incomplete, forever erring on the unfair thanks to the weak-spot problem. While the player was battering a thicket of punks, more would loop around or enter from the other side of the screen and take a cheeky swipe at the player's back, prompting the use of an energy-draining super-move to knock all comers down and start the dance anew. It was a backslap that, gradually but inevitably, could make lone players cough up further credits. It was a commercially savvy design quirk, however, one whose removal was probably never considered, since such a weak spot could easily be covered by a second player (plus, commonly, a third and a fourth) – and yet more credits – in return for some instantly rewarding co-op play, which was often how such games were best enjoyed. It was an essential mechanic for a genre where few enemies are built to survive a head-on assault, but one that always risked generating irritation, turning game progress from flashy satisfaction to the grind of riot survival.

Guardian Heroes, Treasure's scrolling beat 'em up masterpiece of amplified pyrotechnics and showy, skull-cracking combo repertoires, did things differently. Its solution was simple and, typically for Treasure, very hard to steal: The Golden Warrior. The Guardian Heroes were a four-strong band of lively adventurers – Han, Ginjirou, Randy and Nicole – who stumbled upon an enchanted sword that, soon after, was pulled from their hands and into those of a reanimated, armoured skeleton, now bound to serve them by this reunion with the blade's rightful owner. The ultimate bodyguard and

Four main characters appeared – sword master Han, lightning ninja Ginjuro, offensive magician Randy, and unwieldy defensive mage Nicole. Han's physical strengths produced the least striking of on-screen results compared to the escalating spellcasts from the others







The Golden Warrior (above, on ground) could be tasked with six different commands, from inactivity – allowing players to eke more experience out of battles – through to a full-on psychopathic outburst, a flurry of special attacks that terminated in a terrific flashbang that cleared the screen of enemies, along with everything else

SIX APPEAL

***Guardian Heroes*' multiplayer mode isn't too far removed from the action of the main game, dropping six characters into a closed arena in a battle to the death. What it offered was customisation, and the option that every single one of those combatants could be made human via the Saturn's multitap. It's an early example of deathmatch brilliance that's only topped on the console by a *Death Tanks* session or a ten-man *Bomberman* get-together. Players could tailor much of it to their own desire, choosing teams, experience points, and picking characters from any within the game's 45-strong line-up – including its biggest bosses, once they'd been unlocked. There was a downside, though – cheap players could abuse the superior movement of certain characters, hovering invincibly between planes but still able to deal out infuriating helpings of cheesy attacks.**

sidekick, he needed no babysitting but could still be told what to do. Indestructible but not unstoppable in combat, he is compensation for the weak spot; essentially, in coin-op terms, he's a dim but rich pal, infinite credits in tow.

The Golden Warrior was the ultimate in benevolent game design, a free gift with no hidden costs. And unlike many an AI-controlled sidekick, he'd make up for any lack of intelligence with limitless brutality, propelling himself headlong into every single scrap unless ordered to do otherwise, mopping up stragglers with acidic hunger. Each of the four playable Guardian Heroes was given an almost impenetrable block to hide behind, while the Golden Warrior behaved like man's best NPC – able to be sent into an effective and breathtaking rage as and when the player liked. But just what kind of tilt-a-whirl tailspin does that send the difficulty curve into?

Treasure's answer, it seems, is this: Who cares? Who cares when the game itself is realised with such confidence and flair, alive with showboating sprites and fizzing special moves? *Guardian Heroes*' left-to-right battlefields are injected with so much chaotic vitality that the idea of holding it back simply to satisfy the inoffensive smoothness of a difficulty curve seems like party-pooping backwards thinking. Why bother making victory feel like the be-all and end-all when the game itself has succeeded in making taking part the bit that counts? It threw the cat among the pigeons and realised the results with fidelity and imagination, outputting streams of outrageous clashes. It then strapped the whole thing to a bull in a china shop by throwing more and larger enemies onto the screen before the player's wonderful meleé and magic attacks, in an orgy of memorably drawn and brazenly animated sprites. Through it all, a second player was welcome to tag along – to join in, not replace the Golden Warrior – and add their own splatters to the canvas.

Why bother making victory feel like the be-all and end-all when the game itself has succeeded in making taking part the bit that counts?

The Golden Warrior served yet another purpose: to show hesitant or conservative players what a good time they could be having if they stopped being a turtle, continually demonstrating the thrill of flinging yourself yell-first into battle, arms and legs twirling, magic spewing from fingers and ultra-busy combo counters purring away pleasingly. Questions of balance weren't given chance to enter the player's head, distracted as they were by the firestorm that would blaze back and forth along the screen, as even the simplest of D-pad prods and buttons presses called forth devastating effects and flamboyant actions, every move supercharged for maximum feedback and impact, if not damage. All the while, the entire battlefield zoomed in and out to present as much of it as possible. Even by current standards, it's still an unbelievably pretty mess, one that can easily swallow the player's character whole until the combo or magic chain dies down and prone bodies flop back to earth. Perhaps too confusing and dazzling for beginners, it rushed to splash its hyperactive battles across the screen, sharp as bleach and colourful as sweets. As a flourish to what was an already a remarkably capable sprite-management engine, avatars of every character on the screen would



In a rare example of a game willing to turns its pockets out for gamers to see, a debug mode cheat allows, among other things, 2D or 3D collision boxes to be displayed, offering a rare x-ray insight into the mechanics of the game's combat system



In a typically playful, fan-pleasing touch, *Guardian Heroes* featured Golden Silver (near left, middle of picture) who appeared in *Gunstar Heroes*, as a boss character, although he's there without explanation. Four 'Force' gems spiralled above Silver's head, each one specialising in a devastating magic attack

nestle next to their energy bars, replicating their animations like shrunken shadow puppets. And, if that weren't enough, a contagious magic system – whereby any body getting zapped, burned or frozen would transmit the damage to any non-blocking body it touched, friend or foe – resulted in some explosive, volatile and unplanned chain reaction conga-lines of frazzled bodies. Both heroes and enemies could cast enormous spells, the game content to sacrifice framerate for some eye-opening, screen-filling slowdown.

Depth and agility were added to the control system by choosing a blood relative, the one-on-one beat 'em up, as donor, restricting the player to a series of flat planes. Instead of the isometric floors of traditional scrollers, three such planes could be jumped between, providing an escape for players trapped in a scrum of enemies, allowing them to withdraw for evasive action, looping around the crowd for a better vantage point or just to catch a breather. These planes meant that more complex D-pad combinations were now possible – quarter-circles, double taps and more – while bypassing the need to line up an attack, and realised with tactile precision, gracefully adding dodges and counters without ever bogging the control scheme down.

Guardian Heroes shows just how games can be intricate without being delicate, refined without being measured, and can provide excitement through more than just the avoidance of punishment. Treasure's best games don't spawn copycats, a fact easily explained by their niche appeal, but it's hard not to think that if a game like *Guardian Heroes* had ever hit the big time, imitators would have remained in short supply. Its appeal – much like that of *Radiant Silvergun*, *Ikaruga*, *Gunstar Heroes*, *Bangai-o* and, most recently, *Gradius V* – is as much in the realisation as the conception, where technical prowess becomes an inseparable part of design; without the vivid, energetic presentation of the ideas within these games, their impact is crippled.

It's this indivisibility of ideas and implementation – a near-supernatural feat – that explains why Treasure games can feel so much like magic. Not to mention that pride and strange peace of mind that comes from playing a game that feels like it's giving the console a healthy workout, testing its strengths instead of making it groan asthmatically under the demands of a foray into an asset-heavy 3D world which it wasn't yet fit for.

Guardian Heroes is rarely talked of in such a reverential tone as *Radiant Silvergun*, but it's just as vital a part of the Saturn's make-up. It's a beautiful, genre-warping freak, albeit one missing the ingeniously elegant puzzles of the aforementioned shooter. It's as important to the console as *GTA: Vice City*, *God Of War* or *MGS3* are to PS2, a vibrant document of what the machine is capable of, as much a part of the Saturn as the dual CPU architecture that made it a relatively unwieldy machine to develop for. It's no surprise, really; they say that dogs come to resemble their owners, so why expect anything different of such a loyal, hardworking and loving companion as *Guardian Heroes*?

SPLIT ENDINGS

Guardian Heroes featured a total of 30 stages, but required the player to complete less than a third of them to reach an ending. Most stages ended with a selection of choices, almost exclusively in groups of three, that interwove their way in and around the grave tussle taking place between humanity and the Earth and Sky Spirits, with a number of possible outcomes. Depending on their chosen direction, players would face off against a variety of ultimate bosses, each one an essential conquest for those looking to polish off the complete roster for multiplayer arena battles.







THE MAKING OF... IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

Inspired by everything from Jumpman to The Prisoner, this Commodore 64 classic was nonetheless a true original

FORMAT: **C64** PUBLISHER: **EPYX, INC** DEVELOPER: **DENNIS CASWELL** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1984**

It's always the running man that comes to mind first. Then, the underground lair bleeds in around him: the elevator, the platform girders with their incongruously jaunty ice-cream colours. Room after room of chairs and bookcases. Room after room of deadly robots.

"I assure you there was no high concept behind the visuals," says **Dennis Caswell**, the creator of *Impossible Mission*. "I did spend time on trying to get them 'right,' but I didn't trouble myself with what 'right' actually meant. I was just a primitive creating the videogame equivalent of cave paintings. I sometimes lament that real artists had to show up eventually and spoil my innocent fun."

Innocent fun it may have been, but *Impossible Mission* still stands apart from other games of the mid-'80s. Over time it has become one of the Commodore 64's iconic titles, but back then it was pure revelation: elegant, graceful and assured, just like the running man at its heart. It suggested great possibilities for what games could – and to some extent have – become, and its various elements were combined in a way that was exhilarating and coherent.

At first, however, it appeared that it would be anything but coherent. "In those days, we didn't create gargantuan design documents," recalls Caswell. "We just started hacking away and made things up as we went along." The first thing he made up for *Impossible Mission* was the running man himself. A short animation of the figure was enough to get the project moving. "Though Epyx management wasn't quite sure what I had in mind, they were willing to approve the game based on nothing more than that."

It was a story that seems typical of the US games industry at that time. Caswell himself originally started out at Starpath, coding games for the Atari 2600. "They hired me largely because I had my own Apple II computer, so

"I was a primitive creating the videogame equivalent of cave paintings. I sometimes lament that real artists had to spoil my fun"



Furniture in Elvin's lab ranges from jukeboxes to bathtubs. The stacks of stereo equipment and trendy Anglepoise lamps give *Impossible Mission* its own quirky sense of time and place



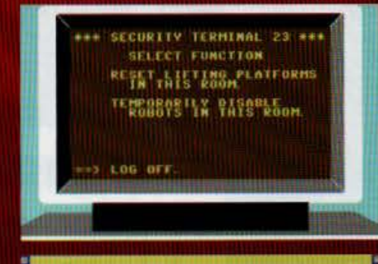
IMPOSSIBLE MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Responsible for decades of misunderstandings, the game's title was one of the last elements to be finalised. "It's probably the most embarrassing aspect of the game," sighs Caswell. "I don't really remember whose idea it was, but its genesis is exactly what you would imagine: since the game is something of a techno-thriller, it seemed fitting to have a title that would call to mind the old TV show Mission: Impossible without actually calling it *Mission: Impossible*, since that would cost money. I hate picking names for things, so when the title *Impossible Mission* was proposed, I had to admit that I didn't have a better idea."

they didn't have to buy me one. I also scored points when I told them that I had reached the top of the fourth building in *Crazy Climber*." A fan of arcade games "before videogames ever existed," he spent his undergraduate years at Berkeley playing *Breakout* and *Space War* in the Silver Ball Gardens arcade. "My all-time favourite game, though, is probably *Rogue*. I loved the fact that so many elements of the game were randomised, making each game unique." *Rogue*, in turn, would exert a great deal of bearing on his most famous title.

Impossible Mission lands the player in an underground complex owned by Professor Elvin Atombender, who plans on destroying the world for entirely understandable reasons. The player must navigate his lair, avoiding robots, as he searches for puzzle pieces. These pieces, fitted together, will provide access to Atombender's inner sanctum.

The game took ten months to develop. During this process, Caswell found himself in a situation not dissimilar to that of the running man himself – alone, and surrounded by machines.

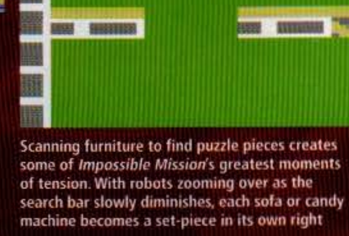




"Having no social skills, the opportunity to create a game with very little interaction with other human beings was, for me, a blessing," he says, wryly. Progress was often slow: with no art tools to use, the graphics were created by hand using graph paper and coloured pencils. Caswell is modest about his achievements in animating the central character: "All it took was the right reference material. I found a book that contained line drawings of athletes. There was a separate drawing for each position. They were, in effect, already animated."

The robots were distinguished not by their animations, but their use of AI. "I wanted to have a variety of robot behaviours, so I created a tiny programming language to program the robots. The language contained instructions such as turn, follow and zap. I scripted a set of behaviours to be assigned to the robots randomly each time. You have to figure out what each robot does, the way you have to find out what each potion does in *Rogue*."

Impossible Mission's other claim to game was its pioneering use of digitised speech, provided by Electronic Speech Systems (ESS). They approached Epyx, looking for



Scanning furniture to find puzzle pieces creates some of *Impossible Mission*'s greatest moments of tension. With robots zooming over as the search bar slowly diminishes, each sofa or candy machine becomes a set-piece in its own right

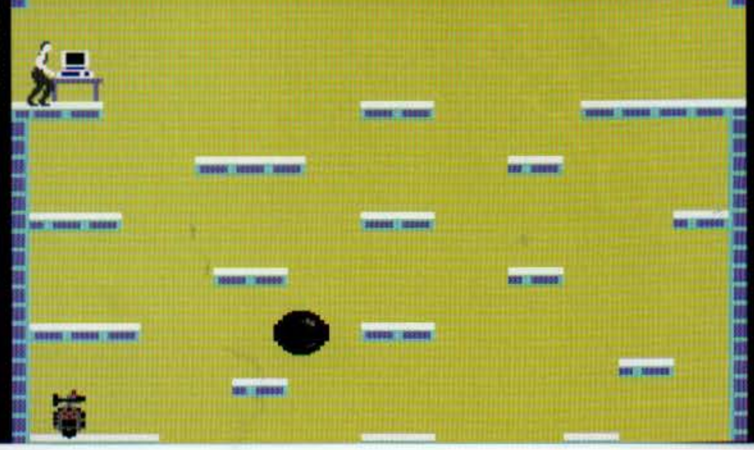
games in development that they could add speech to. *Impossible Mission* became the test case, and it was a great success. "ESS responded by drastically raising their prices, with the result that I don't believe Epyx ever dealt with them again."

Perhaps even greater achievements were the highly memorable sound effects: the clattering feet of the running man, the hubble-bubble of the robots, the whirr of the elevator. Caswell made them himself, with plenty of attention to detail: "I was especially pleased with how the volume ramped up and down when the elevator started and stopped."

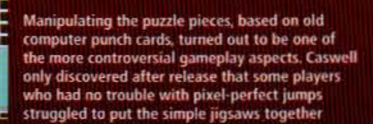
If the image of the running man provided the skeleton of the game, the flesh came from a diverse range of sources. "Somehow, the movie War Games led to the idea of a vast subterranean complex that needed



Impossible Mission's location is impressively oppressive, with thick walls creating a strong sense of being deep underground. Caswell laboured for hours tweaking his random rock generator to perfection to achieve this







Manipulating the puzzle pieces, based on old computer punch cards, turned out to be one of the more controversial gameplay aspects. Caswell only discovered after release that some players who had no trouble with pixel-perfect jumps struggled to put the simple jigsaws together



to be infiltrated and disarmed," says Caswell. It was the first of several inspired lifts. "I probably owe a debt to *Jumpman*, a deviously clever platform game created by Randy Glover. The idea of advancing by solving a series of puzzles was inspired by the old Learning Company classic *Rocky's Boots*." And, of course, the randomised room layouts are a nod to *Rogue*. But that's not all. "A couple of other aspects of the design were the result of some fairly transparent larceny. The memory game is a version of Simon, and the floating black orb is a long-lost relative of Rover, the security guard from The Prisoner."

Caswell is generous to a fault when citing inspirations, but the remarkable fact is that the game that emerged from this development was strikingly original, exerting an oppressive and sinister sense of isolation that was entirely its own. *Impossible Mission* also had the good fortune to emerge at a crucial moment in the development of games. Like *Jet Set Willy*, released the same year, its rooms were playable in any order, and were also linked by elevators and corridors. The effect of this wider structure was to change the game from a simple series of levels into something more substantial – an exploration of an actual place which felt real and coherent.

The finished game was a success for Epyx, though it sold better in Europe than the US. Ported to a dizzying variety of platforms,it spawned several sequels – none of them featuring the original creator's involvement. Caswell stuck around in game development until the mid-'90s, with stints at both Sega and 3DO, but now works for an avionics company designing software for small jets. "I really don't play games any more," he says. "I sometimes listen with half an ear when I hear about a new game, but my priorities have shifted. I'd rather read."

"I think the games that end up sticking in people's memories were, to a great extent, simply in the right place at the right time"

Unable to completely

leave behind the world of creative endeavour, Caswell has since emerged as a poet: "It was probably around the time that I was developing *Impossible Mission* that I first became interested in poetry, and I finally decided that I was going to write, no matter how big an idiot I made of myself." When asked if he sees any similarities between writing a poem and creating a game, Caswell replies: "Apart from the opportunities to nurture pretentiousness and egotism, it's hard to think of anything. Well, maybe one similarity between writing and the way games were made back in the early '80s is that they were both largely solitary pursuits: one person could create something entirely on his own, and I suppose one reason I left the games industry was that I had difficulty adjusting to all of the teamwork and co-ordination and permissions and approvals that were becoming a part of the process of creating a game. One of these days, I really need to do something about my social skills."

Caswell remains pleased, if baffled, at the success of *Impossible Mission*. "To me, it's really just one more game. I think the games that end up sticking in people's memories were, to a great extent, simply in the right place at the right time." Whatever its appeal, the game lives on – its imagery striking and vibrant and the shortest sound cue still remembered. It's a testament to the fact that, for everyone who played *Impossible Mission*, some tiny locked-away part of their brain is forever playing on: still riding the elevators, still dodging the robots, and still searching for that last elusive piece of the puzzle.



GRACE UNDER FIRE

With no means of attacking the robots, the running man's movement is pitched towards a series of balletic somersaults. "I suppose it's true that, by videogame standards, I'm something of a pacifist," says Caswell, citing his earlier game, *Escape From The Mindmaster*, as an attempt to create a videogame without any gunfire. "I'm not totally opposed to blood and guts, mind you. One of the last games that I played all the way through before removing myself from the gaming world was *Quake*, and I played it with as much relish as the next bloodthirsty savage."



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Codemasters Software Company Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 1986

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 160+ at Codemasters Studios

STUDIO HEAD: Gavin Cheshire, vice president



URL: www.codemasters.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Colin McRae series, *TOCA Race Driver*, *LMA Manager*





Brian Lara Cricket (top) and *Operation Flashpoint* (above) are just two of Codemasters' franchises. The *Colin McRae* series (below) started on PC and PlayStation in 1998 and has seen many iterations

Codemasters
GENIUS AT PLAY



LOCATION:
Southam, Warwickshire, England.

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Colin McRae: DIRT, *LMA Manager 2007*, *Brian Lara International Cricket 2007*, the next *TOCA Race Driver* and *Operation Flashpoint* plus unannounced games.

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Codemasters is the longest running privately owned publisher in the UK. What's even more unique about us is that we've been developing games here internally for nearly as long. As both a publisher and developer, Codemasters enjoys one of the most enviable track records in the games industry today. Codemasters prides itself on only publishing quality titles and our history shows that we abide by that very simple philosophy. Codemasters Studios is the in-house development studio and is located in its own building on the site; we're based in beautiful countryside just outside Royal Leamington Spa. We currently employ just over 160 massively talented developers working on our next cutting-edge titles including the massive million-selling franchises of *Colin McRae*, *TOCA Race Driver*, *Brian Lara Cricket* and *Operation Flashpoint*. We're also about to kick off a brand new franchise and currently need the best and most talented developers to build our teams. Having recently secured outside investment, Codemasters is now safely positioned to deliver the next wave of cutting-edge titles across the next generation of consoles and PC."





Rivals get together

Maya 8 is the first release under the banner of new owner Autodesk, so it's no surprise interoperability with one-time rival 3D package 3ds Max 9 is a key feature

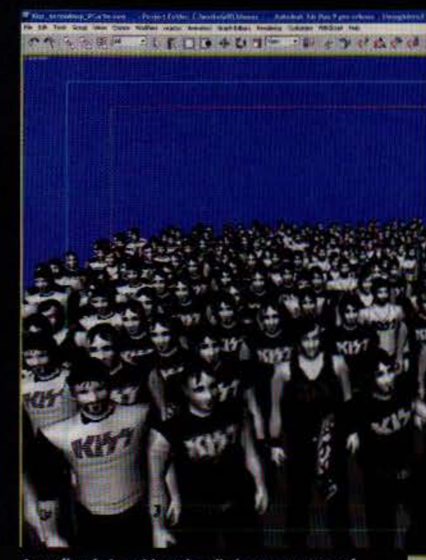


Michel Besner, senior director and 3D product manager for Autodesk

When it comes to putting a smile on the faces of the moneymen, there's nothing better than a bout of M&A. Nothing to do with arcane sexual practices or even a middle class shopping emporium, mergers and acquisitions between companies are one of the fastest way to make some hard cash. Take two companies – whether operating in the same business or not – mash them together, and walk away with your advisory fee. The newly combined company usually makes a good profit in its first years too, as it makes savings by getting rid of duplicate staff and facilities.

In the longer term, however, the outcome of mergers and acquisitions can be much more mixed. It's easy to get excited and overpay for acquisitions, and subsequent reorganisations can suck up huge amounts of time and resources. With the $197 million acquisition of digital content creation tools company Alias by rival Autodesk, which was completed at the start of 2006, it's certainly something that gets customers hot and bothered as well.

Conspiracy theorists claimed it wouldn't be long before Autodesk took an axe to it



As well as being able to handle larger amounts of more complex characters, 3ds Max's new caching features mean its performance is greatly improved

Of course, in this case, game artists were particularly sceptical as Alias' Maya had been locked in vicious competition with Autodesk's 3ds Max package for the best part of a decade. Conspiracy theorists claimed it wouldn't be long before Maya's new owners took an axe to it.

Michel Besner, senior director and 3D product manager for both products within Autodesk's Media and Entertainment division, finds the attitude laughable, however.

"Asking if we're going to kill off Maya or Max is like asking Coca Cola if it's thinking of killing off Coke or Diet Coke," he says. "They are different products, with different strengths and benefits. At the end of the day, both are building the market. In fact, since the deal we've discovered a lot of our customers are using a mix of Max and Maya."

And as Autodesk revealed the latest versions of each product (3ds Max 9 and

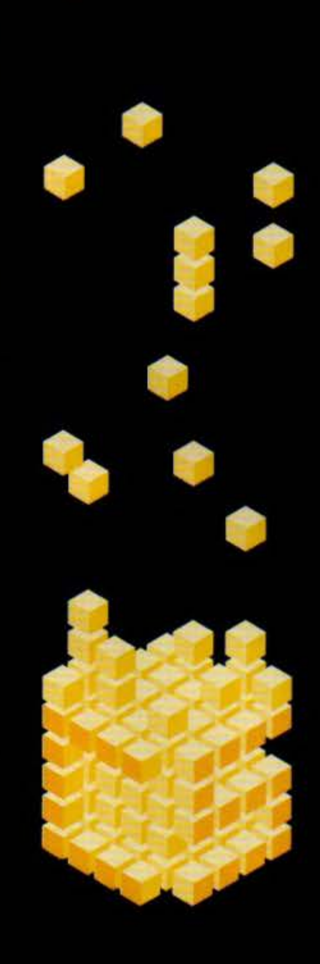
Another step to the Max

With the previous release of 3ds Max featuring plenty of features such as the UV pelt tool, and integration with Autodesk's Vault asset management system, 3ds Max 9 is perhaps best viewed as evolutionary rather than a revolutionary step forward. In particular, with next-gen game development under way throughout the industry, artists don't want to be learning to use loads of new gizmos; they want to be doing their job quicker.

For that reason, faster core performance is one of the main areas Autodesk has worked on delivering. Two key parts of this are support for the 64bit version of Windows, as well as better support for DirectX 9 and 10. This also feeds into making it much easier to display game shaders within 3ds Max viewports, both for DirectX users and Nvidia's Cg shader language, which is part of the PlayStation 3 pipeline.

In terms of productivity, 3ds Max sees enhancements to several existing technologies. The animation system Biped has been further integrated so it shares the same user interface as 3ds Max. The Hair, Cloth and Reactor physics components have been polished, making them faster and more accurate. There's also a smart caching system which reduces the amount of memory required to handle big texture and geometry files. Overall, it's a 3D art package that's much more robust at handling the multi-million polygon models which are now standard within game development.

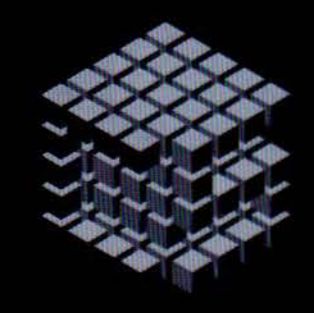






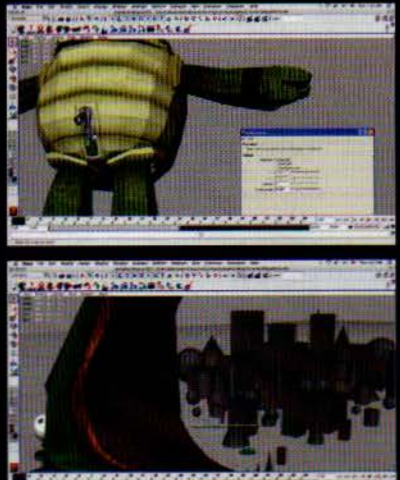


AUTODESK® 3DS MAX® 9 AUTODESK® MAYA® 8



3ds Max's Hair system has been overhauled with a streamlined interface, more control over clumps and individual hairs, and better rendering abilities





One small enhancement to Maya 8 that will make a big difference is the polygon bridging tool. This allows artists to stitch two objects together by selecting border edges. Maya's primitive creation operation combines the ability to create, position and scale primitive shapes very quickly





Maya now enables transfer of data such as colour or vertex information between different resolution meshes (top). Industry-standard renderer Mental Ray is upgraded to version 3.5 in 3ds Max 9, which has a simplified interface and a unified indirect lighting model (above)

Maya 8), at the Siggraph computer graphics show, it claimed feature lists for future releases are already being worked on.

"Before the acquisition, each product had its own individual roadmap that extended out three years," explains **Rob Hoffman**, Autodesk's senior 3D product marketing manager. "Since then, we've added to those roadmaps. The products our customers have come to rely on will continue to be there in the future."

In the short term, the focus for both products is threefold: improving basic performance, improving the productivity of users and fitting better into customers' art pipelines, part of which is fulfilled by improving the interoperability between all Autodesk's products, including the likes of animation package MotionBuilder, and file interchange format FBX. In this respect, one clever system called Point Caching has been introduced, which makes it much easier to swap a model and its animation between the packages. Similar to a metadata format, this works by reducing complex animation data such as a model's skinning or inverse kinematics into the pure movement of each vertex that makes up the model. The resulting file is enormous, but can easily be streamed.

But if the conspiracy theorists' fears over Maya's demise can be assuaged, the thorny issue of pricing will be less easily overcome. One reason is a price war from 2002 triggered when Alias heavily discounted the cost of Maya and forced other companies in the sector to follow suit. Now however, thanks to its almost monopolistic position in 3D art tools, Autodesk's accountants will be looking to reverse that trend, making sure the Alias acquisition isn't marked down by the stock market as one which proved to be a commercial failure in the long run.

Besner says no change in pricing is planned, currently at least: "In the future, we'll definitely be listening and seeing how our customers are working. Clearly pricing is one topic where we'll get feedback from our customers," he says.

Maya builds for the future

To all intents and purposes, Maya 8 appears unchanged from when it was an Alias product. It still comes in three flavours: the extensive and more expensive Maya Unlimited; the standard Maya Complete; and the free Personal Learning Edition, which currently offers Maya 7. It's also still available on three operating systems: Windows (32- and 64bit), Linux and Mac OS X. Hoffman says the company will continue to support those operating systems in future.

Under the hood there are some changes, however. One of the criticisms of Maya was that while it made difficult tasks easy, it had a nasty habit of making easy tasks difficult. Examples of fixing some of these quirks include the option to swap in your web browser of choice for the default Internet Explorer. Another is the ability to click, drag and scale primitive shapes such as spheres and triangles in a more fluid manner. Maya's UV texturing tools have also been updated, while the ability to integrate a game engine within Maya's viewport (incidentally something long supported within 3ds Max) has been added. Of course, there are hundreds of other changes too – everything from performance boosts in its underlying algorithms to support for multi-threading and better modelling tools – but there's a definite feeling that Maya 8 is a release which creates a solid foundation before he next wave of innovation is unleashed.


BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

BRAINS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

First of all I would just like to say: BRRRAAAIIIIINNNNSSSS! [Puts horse's head mask on and rushes round smashing zombies in the head with a Flying V guitar.]

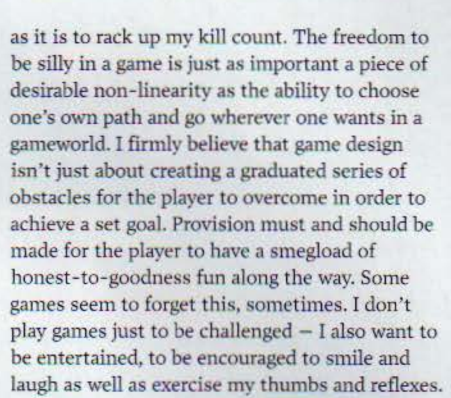
Yes, the demo of *Dead Rising* is here, and it's brought my 360 out, and plenty of fun has been had running around smashing zombies to bits with anything that falls to hand. Excellent fun (try putting on a nice bit of Rammstein, perfect murderous rampage music that).

Dead Rising seems like it'll be fun partly because it is gloriously silly. It could so easily have been a po-faced survival horror taking itself a bit too seriously, but once I started seeing video clips of zombies blundering about in marshmallow heads and masks I thought it would probably be a lot of fun to play, and the demo bears this out. To me it's just as important a mission objective to find and wear the horse's head mask and the stupidest clothes I can find as it is to rack up my kill count. The freedom to be silly in a game is just as important a piece of desirable non-linearity as the ability to choose one's own path and go wherever one wants in a gameworld. I firmly believe that game design isn't just about creating a graduated series of obstacles for the player to overcome in order to achieve a set goal. Provision must and should be made for the player to have a smegload of honest-to-goodness fun along the way. Some games seem to forget this, sometimes. I don't play games just to be challenged – I also want to be entertained, to be encouraged to smile and laugh as well as exercise my thumbs and reflexes.

There was a guy on the Llamasoft forums who seemed to have a peculiarly bleak view of gaming – he measured every game in terms of "hours to completion" and would only buy games that took a certain number of hours or more to complete. He once complained of "finishing off" a particular game in one eight-hour session.

It's sad to look at gaming as something that you just bash through as fast as you can and then toss aside as 'completed'. It isn't entirely the guy's fault for thinking that way, since some games seem to be designed around the assumption that you'll begin, progress and end, with maybe a few half-arsed side quests thrown in as a sop to getting you to load up the old save file a couple of times after you're done (but which you never actually get around to doing).

Designers struggle to add more and more content on ever-larger media in order to make the time to completion longer, but this in turn makes the games more expensive to make and to run, and at the end – you're still done.



> Part of what gives a game longevity isn't how long I have to play it before I get to the end – it's all about making me want to come back

Part of what gives a game longevity isn't how long I have to play it before I get to the end – it's all about making me want to come back even after I've achieved whatever might be considered the ultimate goal. And that's a very old-school design skill. Back in the day there simply weren't resources enough to allow for complex stories, missions and plotlines, so many games never ended. The focus of the designer was entirely on making the very act of playing so pleasurable and so much fun that the player would come back for more even when the only reward was a slightly bigger number than before.

This ideal is still applicable to modern games, and it is still possible to find it – I've completed every version of *Katamari Damacy*, but I'll never stop playing it, simply because the act of playir is a huge amount of fun and makes me smile. I think it is maybe that aspect of gaming that people seek when they play retro games on MAME. The vast majority of those old games are actually a bit rubbish when you take off the rose-tinted specs, but the very best of them st have something which keeps them valid and enjoyable even after 25 years of technological progress. There is little in modern gaming that can elicit the same exquisitely, completely involved feeling of precision, exhilaration and control that one feels when playing extremely well on the harder levels of the likes of *Defende* and *Robotron*. There is something pure and visceral about that feeling which is ageless, and often lacking in games of today.

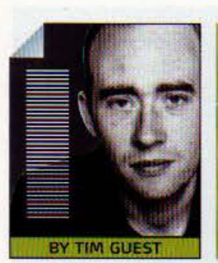
This is in danger of sounding like a paean t twitch games, and I don't mean to imply that story-based games are in any way less valid; on that in order to prevent the emergence of the likes of Mr Super Boring Gamer I mentioned earlier, designers might learn from those old twitch games and pay attention to making the actual experience of playing compelling, so tha people really will bother coming back for those side quests rather than just tossing the game aside when they are done. Of course I realise that it's in companies' commercial interest to keep players moving from one game to the next but as a designer I hate the idea of my game jus being used up and thrown away like that. I love the fact that people still play *Tempest 2000* to this day, simply because it's so much fun.

And on that note I think I shall send this of and get back to attempting to create my own little personal slice of old-school, twitch-gaming heaven right here inside my devkit.

Ooh, but before I get back to that – BRRRAAAIIIIINNNNSSSS!

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser


Illustration: tstokes


BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

THERE IS NO ESCAPE

When I missed my first appointment with Rivers Run Red, a virtual branding agency, I expected a rescheduling to be straightforward. Then I received a reply: "Finally out of the woods – scratched to bits and beetles in my hair!"

In fact, when I met the agency's founder, **Justin Bovington**, I realised we'd met before. Although this was the first time we had sat side-by-side in real life, his *Second Life* avatar had met mine over a chat with the journalist Wagner James Au (at the time, I think, we were hovering over a Dr Seuss wonderland complete with giant purple spiral candy-sticks.)

The company clearly wasn't an everyday branding agency. Until recently, corporations have been cautious about how to extend their brands into virtual worlds. A while ago, an in-game advertising company, Massive Inc, launched a kind of virtual billboard it called, snappily, 'interactive advertisement technology' (essentially a 3D model of a Toyota Yaris). In September last year, the US bank Wells Fargo dipped its toe in a little deeper with *Second Life*'s Stagecoach Island: an invite-only corner of the virtual world designed to teach financial literacy to young people (while also, presumably, promoting Wells Fargo). It would seem, though, that for companies to take up a successful presence in online worlds, they will have to try harder. Virtual worlds' residents are attracted there because they want to take part; ads that try to press a message on them would seem the least likely to grab their attention.

That's the reasoning of Rivers Run Red, at least. "You don't walk into someone's house and demand they look at something," Bovington told me. "So we don't do that in *Second Life*. What we do is corral it. We can set up areas where people can come and take part, enjoy themselves; they can opt in, or opt out."

Up to now, brands have run free in virtual worlds. In *Second Life*, you can buy a virtual Adidas T-shirt and none of the money goes to Adidas. Any developer will, when issued take-down notices, remove any trademarked material – but for now no one seems to notice. That might be about to change. After the recent rush of publicity about virtual worlds – with the tipping point perhaps the appearance of *Second Life* on the cover of Business Week – corporations are paying attention. (In one meeting of a multinational entertainment company, Bovington told me, someone from top management, discussing their billion-dollar budget, turned to his creative director and said: "What's our *Second Life* strategy?" The creative director had no idea what he meant, but he found out pretty quickly.) Since the Business Week article, Bovington said, "everything has changed. Last year, 80 per cent of our business was real world. Now, 80 per cent is virtual."

> It would seem, though, that for companies to take up a successful presence in online worlds, they will have to try harder

For many, it seems, taking up a place in a virtual world means upsetting those who are already there. I have written about my own early troubles in virtual worlds and, as Justin reminded me, Rivers Run Red had its own difficult birth. In December 2003, it bought the first *Second Life* virtual island at auction for $1,250 – many times what residents expected it to cost. When residents discovered it was a corporate agency, there were protests: virtual avatars holding banners with crossed out Disney and Gap logos, and some mock-terrorist attacks. Since then, the company's commitment to working with residents – it employs a whole group of full-time, virtual employees who they feel they know, but have never met – and being sensitive to the existing *Second Life* culture has calmed the community. "We've turned down a lot of work that wasn't right for the community," Bovington told me. "You can't just dump stuff in here and expect people to take an interest." They work hard to create something that gives both ways, as opposed to what he referred to as the 'interruption culture' of the TV commercial.

Rivers Run Red is planning to explore the possibilities in depth. It is setting up a virtual TV studio to film avatars in the same way as a real one, and is working with Duran Duran to produce the group's first concert inside *Second Life*. It's working with Penguin to bring the first cyberpunk novels – that first envisioned shared virtual spaces – into the spaces they predicted.

No wonder the staff needed some time in the woods. They'd been, it turned out, on a survival course with Ray Mears. It seemed like the perfect antidote to a virtual life, but they had *Second Life* on the brain. Bovington told me how even holding up a stick reminded him of the virtual world. "What people remember about *Second Life*, the most memorable thing they do at first, is make a solid, grab a texture and bring something from the real world into the virtual world. They've projected a level of personality into their virtual surroundings. It's like making things, at the most basic level, out of twigs: people get it. We felt like we were reliving a key moment in human evolution."

I asked if he saw the emergence of *Second Life* as a parallel moment in evolution. "Absolutely", he said.

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net


Illustration: tstokes

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

SCARRED BUT STILL FIGHTING

BY MR BIFFO

What's worse than biting into an apple and finding a worm? Answer: Biting into an apple, and the minute you bite into the apple you unexpectedly poo your pants. And you're on television. And you're the heir to the throne.

There's another thing worse than biting into and finding a worm, and it's this thing: de Quervain's Tendonitis. Or, to put it in terms we both understand; repetitive strain injury. To wit; after years of fondling joypads my wrist has finally given up. But before you all start with the smutty sniggering, it's not the dirty sort of wrist movement that's affecting me, but, basically, my fire-button thumb.

Though I'm currently in a "cycle of healing" (according to my doctor, who has chosen to ignore my insistence that it's no better than it was when I first developed it), it's likely I'll have the RSI for the rest of my life, and it'll keep flaring up, and there isn't a great deal I can do about it, short of not using my wrist. Like that's going to happen. Matron.

In a funny sort of way I take some degree of satisfaction in sustaining a battle scar from playing videogames. I'm clearly more hardcore than I thought I was, and consequently it's been a bit of a shock. There can be no more six-hour sessions on *Call Of Duty 2*. No more staying up until the wee small hours in *World Of WarCraft*. I've got to pace myself.

Consequently, it has also severely curtailed my game playing over the last couple of months. I've managed to battle through *New Super Mario Bros* and *Half Life 2: Episode One* – doubtless delaying my recovery by months – but it's been left to the DS's stylus to provide my only other gaming thrills, because it's the only way I can play games without getting the bad pains.

It's not all lamentable news – despite my earlier exaggeration, there are signs that it's improving. I've just started playing *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* again, which has been a bit like shoving a water cannon in your mouth after drinking nothing but sand for a week.

All this combined has had the knock-on effect of making me appreciate simplicity in games. Prior to the RSI flare-up I'd been playing *Oblivion*, the videogame equivalent of calling a spade a sturdy digging tool having a thick handle and a heavy, flat blade that can be pressed into the ground with the foot. It's about as overblown as games get, like adding strings to a rock album, and I'm sort of tired of games that do that (stand up and be counted *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*).

> "I take some degree of satisfaction in sustaining a battle scar from playing videogames. I'm clearly more hardcore than I thought I was"

Thing is, it never used to be like this. When games began they were beautifully simple to the point of art. This isn't to say I don't enjoy more complex games, but I'm finding my patience tested more and more. When I settle down to play a game I tend to ask myself: "What's this game about? What's the big idea?" and if I don't have that question answered pretty much off the bat then I tend to drift away from it.

Playing *Half-Life 2: Episode One* has reminded me just how simple *Half-Life 2* was. It is, pretty much, based around a single idea; the physics engine. Yes, that's probably an over-simplification of a beautifully executed game, but the point stands.

Awful confession time: I've never really gotten on with the 3D Mario games. *New Super Mario Bros* has rammed home for me just how badly I don't get along with them. In many respects *Mario 64* and *Super Mario Sunshine* do as good a job as you could imagine in translating that 2D world, and the feel of that 2D gameplay, into three dimensions. But the minute you have to start fannying around with a camera you've lost something. It's adding to the gameplay, hiding it beneath an unnecessary complication. It's another thing to do, like the difference between waitress service and having to go and fetch the food from the kitchen yourself.

My heart sank when I saw those videos of *Super Mario Galaxy*. I'm sure it will be abundant with genius, but it looks – once again – like it adds more yet gameplay atop the original concept.

Given the euphoria which greeted Mario's return to two dimensions, I get the impression I'm not the only one who feels this way. It's like everyone has exhaled, and gone: 'Finally... they remembered what we all liked in the first place.'

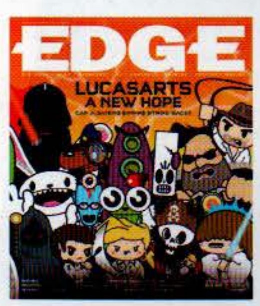
When I first saw the videos of *Sonic Wild Fire* I groaned. I mean, on one level how awful does it look? It's just left and right, using the Wii controller as a sort of handlebar (my wrist just gave a little cheer). Except, the more I thought about it the less awful it seemed. It may yet turn out to be awful, but in principle it's a great idea; strip Sonic back to the essence of the character – his speed. Certainly, it seems a damn sight more of a logical approach than the next gen, and allegedly back-to-basics, "new" *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Certainly there seems to be a shift back to simpler, high-concept gaming, ironically (having just moaned about *Mario Galaxy*) spearheaded by Nintendo's DS and Wii.

I'm keeping my fingers crossed. Or I would be if it didn't make my eyes water.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 166



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Buy your way to gaming success with Xbox 360

Well, it had to happen at some point. Early days yet, but what impact this will have on gaming is open to debate. Anyone want to literally pay to finish a difficult game?
iboris

Seeing as it already happens with PC MMORPGs, I s'pose it was only a matter of time until it happened with consoles too. Still, I hope there are in-game bonuses for those who complete the game without buying tons of weapons off the Marketplace. If not, it's a sad day for gaming.
Blue Swirl

Now that you mention it, haven't we always been paying to finish arcade games? 10p to continue, I'm sure everybody here old enough to remember 10p credits (and those old 10p pieces, why, when this were all fields...) has done it.
Pause

Yeah, but we didn't have to pay £40 first to step up to the machine!
iboris

I've just read Mr Biffo's column in **E**166 regarding the demise of the physical retail store. It's a popular emerging concept but I can't help but feel it's a bit premature. People will never entirely swap owning something tangible – in this case a 'real' game with case and booklet – solely for data stored on a disc or hard drive. That is not to say that digital distribution will not flourish, but I think a closer look is due at the long-term effects of digital vs physical media. For example, I tend to feel the albums I download from iTunes lack significance and are cheap and disposable, paying them less mind once on my iPod than the CD I purchased and ripped myself.

And how will people feel years from now when they want to lend a game to a friend, and they're not quite sure just where the hell it is, and in what box that DVD-R could possibly be stored in? Did you even make a backup? Were you allowed to? Can you even lend that game to your friend with that DRM? There's a huge psychological spin to digital vs physical products that we just haven't had time to consider yet, as iTunes, Steam and Live Marketplace are all relatively new. People still produce and purchase vinyl, the web has not replaced books or libraries, and the desire to own a real videogame will never be entirely replaced, despite how novel it may seem at the moment.
Moo

"How will people feel years from now when they want to lend a game to a friend, and they're not quite sure just where the hell it is?"

It would be easier to be enthusastic about physical game purchases if current packaging wasn't so miserly.

David Martin (Inbox, **E**166) raises an interesting point about writing in videogames. It's true that a good story and solid writing can add more to a game than an increased polygon count and that this fact is overlooked by developers. But it's equally true that writing for the page, or for the non-interactive screen, is a fundamentally different process than writing for games. Books and movies have protagonists and narrators, characters separated from the reader who tell a story. Most games, by contrast, have an avatar which is not separated from the player. The process then switches from the reader being told a story to the player being in a story.

To date I know of no game that has acknowledged this crucial difference, much less made use of the possibilities it offers. Even games that have placed significant effort into storytelling and plot still follow the traditional structure, with the most adventurous offering a few branches off the line in the middle and perhaps multiple endings. This structure is unable to take advantage of the true interactivity and non-linearity that gaming can offer.

Games, in my opinion, can challenge our set conceptions of how a 'story' should work, but games writers are still offering us little better than souped-up choose-your-own-adventure titles (if often exceptionally good ones.) The line is still the model. Stories in games should be modelled more like a globe: the player starts at the centre, with a 360° choice of paths to take to the surface (or 'end'). In theory, every player should have a different experience depending on their route and, crucially, a unique perception of the globe itself and its surrounding 'sky' once on the surface. It's a challenge for writers, but a potentially revolutionary vision for narrative if successfully realised.
Daragh McDowell


Win a DS Lite for the best letter

It's likely a large proportion of the game design community would agree with those objectives. What's not so simple is implementation. Is a story with that much flexibility still a story?

I've just put down the latest **Edge** and after reading it, the thing which I took greatest interest in was the section about women in games.

I think that the games industry will start to take girls seriously once girls start to take the games industry seriously, which won't happen on a large scale until we have more games like *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossing*. Why? Because men and women are different (can I make clear now that I know lots of girls, and am not sexist) and that's nobody's fault, it is down to evolution. In the past men had to be more logical and more athletic to invent fire and spear mammoths, women had to be better communicators and more organised to bring up children and the

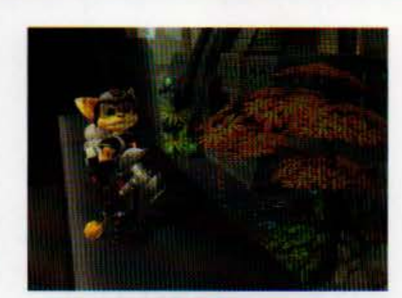


like. That is why no matter how hard my mum tries, she could never be as clever as Einstein or as strong as my dad, but no matter how hard they tried, he could never be as organised as she is.

With this in mind it is easy to see why the type of games that have been produced over the last 30-odd years have attracted mainly men. Because of evolution, men are more competitive and stubborn and concentrate on just one thing at a time. Basically, my point is that women in general don't want an involving, time-consuming plot with lots of shooting and killing and puzzle solving. Women in general want the aforementioned DS games to dip into and put down again. Once we have 50 per cent of games being sold to women, putting female characters in a game won't be a huge step at all.

Joshua Prettyman

We suspect you'll need all your mammoth-spearing strength and Einstein-rivalling wits to meet the backlash to your letter next month.



David Birch thinks Ratchet & Clank would have worked just as well with a female feline

"My point is that women in general don't want an involving, time-consuming plot with lots of shooting and killing and puzzle solving"

So Electronic Arts big cheese David Gardner has reportedly 'gone cold' on Sony's PSP, saying: "There's no doubt that EA has historically bet more on PSP. I think we were excited by the technology, but the consumers have proven that actually what they want is fun. We must never forget that what we need to focus on is fun and so EA is putting more effort behind DS games, and creative ones that really take advantage of the hardware." Well, give that man a cake!

If we run his words through the Corporate-EA-Spokesperson-Translatatron™ we get: "We saw how much easier it would be to lazily shovel over all of our biggest properties to the PSP than to take time to cleverly fit our games to the more delicate DS, and you know what? Turns out people don't want lazily-shovelled stuff, they want games that cleverly make use of the hardware! For this, the blame must rest with Sony for making the PSP so powerful. Also, we've seen Nintendo's DS outselling the PSP, so we'd better get a load more DS games out there!"

I know criticising EA is like shooting fish in a barrel, but this takes the biscuit. What will David Gardner and his fellow EA geniuses come out with next? "Having looked at the price of games across the board, we have concluded that gamers would rather pay 50p per title than £50"?

M Gemmell

Shooting Fish In A Barrel sounds like a great DS game. And a bargain for 50p. Are you listening, David Gardner?

I find it difficult to put my finger on what I find disconcerting about your **E**166 article 'Different For Girls', but I think it's mostly that the issues you discuss don't seem all that difficult to overcome, despite the claims made.

I think the perception that there is a problem that 'needs' to be overcome here is almost as hindering as the problem itself. I would have thought that when designing a game, the first priority would be a concept and a design. Once you know what you are making, the story and characters are fitted over the top. In some cases the story is more integral, and you write for a specific character design.

For the most part though, I would argue that your character's gender *is* arbitrary. Raquelle and Clink works just as well as Ratchet and Clank, (although perhaps better character names would help them shine.) In most games where you're running around shooting or piloting a spaceship or stealing cars, you don't really care too much what your character looks like so long as it's fun. With the vast majority of videogames, character gender makes no difference, (and yes I *can* imagine Kratos as a lanky Valkyrie with plate-mail bikini, without it having a major effect on the gameplay.) Of course, where a female lead is an unremarkable event, she is quickly forgotten. Recently I've been playing through *Eternal Darkness* and *Project Zero*, which never come up as examples when people write articles about women in games. So why the lack of female leads? It's really not that they're difficult to create. Pick any five games you've played recently and make the characters female, it doesn't take much imagination. While gunslinging and acts of daring and violence are seen stereotypically as the male domain, making such a character female isn't hard. Designers subconsciously pick male leads because they don't consider the issue, and gravitate towards characters they associate with (and most character designers are male.)

On the other hand, starting with the question 'how do I create a strong female lead that isn't just an arbitrary choice?' is severely limiting. Mr Tornquist is trying to introduce game elements that draw attention to his character's femininity, and such elements are always going to draw criticism from the thigh-hating censors. Censorship itself is also a problem here. Arthur in his boxers is a comical figure, but if you try and strip half that many clothes off a female character, you'll raise an angry mob. Just do it and ignore the fallout. Or rather, write the story and use such elements if they show up, rather than try and twist the game idea to include them. If such additions are gratuitous or arbitrary, then people have a right to complain.

To conclude, yes, in some situations you don't get the option. *FFX2* doesn't work with boys dressing up, and *FIFA* needs the right players or the fans won't be happy. I view these as edge cases though, rather than the norm.

Continued ▶

F

Topic: Stuff you miss

Lives. Don't get many of them these days.
equinox_code

Short-term invincibilty. Just doesn't happen any more.
Lukeim64

Fast-forwarding to the right bit of the Crash demo tape to play your desired demo.
Superking

Getting impaled on a row of giant, iron spikes, only to drop off the bottom of the screen, with nothing more than a decremented counter and a stupid look on your little face (Sonic) to acknowledge your fallacy.
dynamite-ready

I miss format-unique game boxes. Everything comes in DVD cases these days, it's so dull. What happened to the giant ass boxes PC games used to come in? And I can't be the only one who thought the DC boxes were sexy...
Blue Swirl

Really bad box art that tries to combine soldiers/guns with muzzle flash/dragons/huge breasted women in ripped clothing/swords/magic/beards/monsters/mullets and fast cars.
PGTips

Marathons and Opal Fruits. And the days when autofire gave you an advantage.
Leyden

Chip music. Or at least being able to recognise chip music. The C64 wasn't half bad, and the Amiga could really belt out some sounds, and you knew they weren't just being played, but actually processed. Nice.
Stu

That sound you get when you put another 10p into the machine. Key 5 for the MAME owners.
BoBaB

I miss the time before the internet when if you were stuck in a game, you'd either try figuring it out yourself, or you'd wait until the next game mags came and read hints and tips about the game there.
MrMonkey

Just design a game, and make the lead a girl, you'll be surprised how little people will comment.
David Birch.

If only more publishers shared your confidence. In the meantime, share the joy of winning this month's DS Lite.

While your feature on girls and games was interesting, it seemed your focus was firmly on women as leads in games. I can't help thinking this is merely a pixel in a larger sprite.

A large percentage of games still revolve around destruction – blowing stuff up, killing people/aliens/whatever, beating others to a pulp. With all respect to equality, these are primarily testosterone-driven activities. The very core of these games is aimed at the primal instincts of the male – conquer, destroy, or simply protect one's territory. Is it surprising that there are few female leads in these games? Not in the least. Is it surprising that the few female leads there are amount to eye candy? Of course not. You referenced *Dead Or Alive*, a game about beating the living crap out of one another. Raising the adrenaline. Getting that testosterone flowing. In the heat of the pummelling, does a man want to see a deep and thoughtful realistic female protagonist? No. A man wants to see titties. Simple as that. It's just nature.

Even *FFX2* which, on the surface, seemed to embrace feminine features, has you spend more time in battles kicking the crap out of enemies than doing anything else. It's no wonder something doesn't quite sit right with the game – it takes the surface dressing of a female and applies it to a male core. Much like a transvestite.

The issue is not the characters. The issue is the core of what a large percentage of games are about – destruction. In a way, I think this is why the horror genre (in both movies and games) has been able to feature female leads more comfortably. In horror, rarely does the heroine makes a conscious choice to go out and destroy. It's survival at its most basic. The motivations are much clearer. More importantly, they are less about that buzz that comes with destroying a powerful enemy and more about the relief of simply surviving the encounter. It's just not as testosterone-driven.

So as for why female leads are few and lacking – well, it seems to me that the games simply aren't there to house them. I think the bigger question is why do such a large percentage of games still revolve around destruction?
Jason Tammemagi.



Topic: Being played

Can anyone think of a way that unscrupulous publishers could make money from the in-game actions of unsuspecting gamers? Could you be clearing minefields while playing *Minesweeper* or piloting unmanned aircraft into war zones via *After Burner*?
freethinker

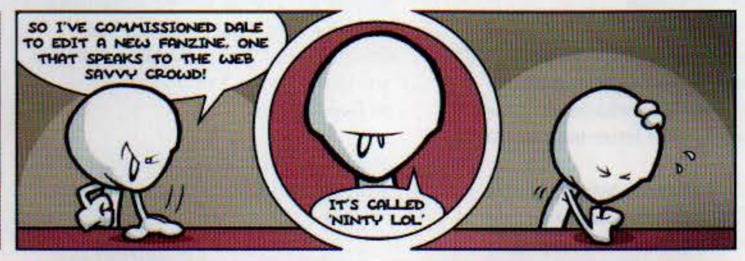
I'm surprised nobody has managed to release a virus into one of the big MMORPGs to make money from it somehow.
ChopperByrne

I'd like to think that when I play *Phoenix Wright*, I'm influencing a real life court case. And then there's *Trauma Centre*.
ecureuil

When you stroke Agro in *SotC*, a horse in a field somewhere feels loved.
Zoom!

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